

An ESRC Research Group



Local Identities of Poverty: poverty narratives in decentralized government and the role of poverty research in Uganda

GPRG-WPS-013

Phil Woodhouse

Global Poverty Research Group

Website: <http://www.gprg.org/>

The support of the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) is gratefully acknowledged. The work was part of the programme of the ESRC Global Poverty Research Group.

Local Identities of Poverty: poverty narratives in decentralized government and the role of poverty research in Uganda

Phil Woodhouse
Global Poverty Research Group and
Institute for Development Policy and Management, University of Manchester, UK

© Phil Woodhouse 2004

Abstract

This paper takes as its point of departure recent research that suggests pro-poor policies are more likely to be supported by central elites than local elites, and that, in contexts where there is significant decentralization of government, central government may need to challenge local elite resistance to ensure effective implementation of those policies. The paper explores whether poverty reduction strategies can be made more effective use of research to effect a 're-identification' of the nature and causes of poverty. It focuses on Uganda, where research has had a high profile in the government's Poverty Eradication Action Plan, particularly through the Uganda National Household Survey (UNHS), and the Uganda Participatory Poverty Assessment Programme (UPPAP). The paper examines the methodology and impact of these research programmes. It argues that the UNHS could, with appropriate changes in how expenditure is interpreted in terms of well-being, be useful as an indicator of national poverty trends, but sample structure constrains its application as a means of monitoring decentralized delivery of poverty-reduction programmes. The current UPPAP methodology provides a rich source of detail on the nature of poverty in Uganda, but the validity of its findings is undermined by emphasis on aggregation of local information to national level with consequent loss of contextualised understanding of social processes creating poverty. The paper argues that, in illuminating such processes, a more rigorous application of qualitative research method would challenge assumptions about the 'residual' nature of poverty that underlie both 'participatory research' and decentralization as a strategies of poverty reduction.

Introduction

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

Decentralization is commonly regarded as a central component of 'good governance' requirements of internationally sponsored poverty reduction strategies.

Decentralization of resource management associated with democratic representation is expected to improve 'responsiveness' of government to the needs of the poor by allowing the poor more direct participation in decision processes and making local government officers more accountable for their decisions. This expectation remains the prevailing orthodoxy, despite evidence that 'local elites' who invariably run decentralized government are unlikely to be more 'pro-poor' than those who run central government (Johnson, 2001; Crook and Sverrisson, 2001).

This raises questions of how poverty is conceptualised by policy-makers and policy implementors, and whether there are opportunities for making poverty reduction strategies more effective through a 're-identification' of the nature and causes of poverty that shifts the discourse on poverty in a 'pro-poor' direction. One obvious

means through which such a re-identification of poverty may be achieved is through research. The case of Uganda is particularly interesting in this regard as the development of the government's poverty reduction strategy has attributed a prominent role to evidence about poverty gathered from a variety of research activities, of which the two most important are the Uganda National Household Surveys (UNHS) and the Ugandan Participatory Poverty Assessment Programme (UPPAP). This paper reviews the ways the different research approaches have informed the government's poverty reduction strategy, and considers how research on poverty can be better designed to promote the cause of the poor. It argues that a belief in the efficacy of decentralization as a means to attack poverty derives from the same assumptions about the nature of poverty that underlie current practice of participatory poverty assessments. It further argues that weaknesses in these assumptions translate into a lack of effectiveness of decentralization as a poverty-reduction strategy and also an inability of participatory poverty assessments to provide insights needed to challenge prevailing poverty discourse and identify alternative forms of pro-poor intervention.

Uganda's Decentralization Policy and Poverty Reduction.

The Ugandan Government's Poverty Eradication Action Plan (PEAP) was established in 1997 as its policy framework for fighting poverty for the period 1997-2017, with an overall goal to reduce 'absolute poverty' to less than 10% of the population by 2017 (MFPED, 2000; MFPED, 2001). Internationally accepted as Uganda's Poverty Reduction Strategy, the PEAP promotes multi-sectoral activities towards four principal goals: a framework for economic growth and transformation; good governance and security; an increased ability among the poor to raise their incomes; and an improved quality of life for the poor.

The PEAP activities focus mainly on primary health care, rural feeder roads, education, and water supply. With the publication of the Plan for Modernisation of Agriculture (PMA), in 2000, PEAP activities were extended to include the promotion of commercialisation of agriculture (MAAIF/MFPED, 2000). The funding of PEAP activities is linked to macro-budget planning through a Medium Term Expenditure Framework (MTEF) which defines the overall budget constraint, or 'resource envelope'. The operation of PEAP brings together two strands of reform:

decentralization of governance; and 'pro-poor' expenditure of funds made available under the Heavily Indebted Poor Country (HIPC) debt-relief programme.

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

Central-local transfers more than doubled from 1997-8 to 2000-01, when they totalled Ug Sh 512 billion (US\$300million). However, the UCG component fell from 24 percent to 15 percent over the same period (Francis and James, 2003). Management and disbursement of CG is administratively complex due to a multiplicity of separate transfers and stringent monitoring requirements to ensure expenditure complies with the conditionality of the grants, by sector and locality. Some have argued that the preponderance of conditional grants in local expenditure has reinforced central line-ministry control, with local government acting as little more than a transmission belt for centrally-determined investment programmes (Craig and Porter, 2002). Conversely, however, there are relatively few reporting requirements attached to

unconditional grants, most of which are spent on general administrative costs (Francis and James, 2003), or to locally-raised revenue. There is now considerable evidence (UPPAP, 2000, 2002; Francis and James, 2003; Yates and Moncreiffe, 2002) that accountability for the expenditure of such funds is poor, and that, in certain respects - notably that of privatization of collection of local taxes - the action of local government bears particularly harshly upon the poor. This evidence calls into question one of the principle assumptions underlying policies of decentralization of government: that those in power will be more responsive to the needs of the poor when the poor are closer, and therefore more visible, to the seat of power. A similar assumption underlies 'participatory poverty assessments' (Narayan et al, 2000) as a method of understanding poverty and developing policy to reduce poverty: if the voices of the poor can be made more audible than government, and non-poor society more generally, will be more sympathetic to their plight and more ready to support action to assist them. In both instances the assumption of responsiveness on the part of the non-poor ignores the critical role of discourse (e.g how much blame is attributed to the poor for their plight) in filtering how the voices of the poor are perceived and interpreted by those that hear them. The remainder of the paper considers how different approaches to poverty research have informed perceptions of poverty within central and local government, and assesses whether they may be made more effective.

Poverty Research : the Uganda National Household Survey

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

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

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

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

the introduction to his analysis of the UNHS that his focus "is on the measurement of changes; we do not attempt to explain them." (2001:4).

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

This last point is compounded by a second limitation, linked to the first, that inequality is represented at 'regional' levels, rather than at a scale that can be related to decentralized government action. The potential significance of this in local politics is considerable, and reflects the wider issue of how how emphasis of research findings may be modified by the political context. The treatment of inequality of consumption in reporting of the UNHS findings illustrates the point in its emphasis, observed above, that the main 'message' on inequality was that the rural-urban gap had

increased. However, Appleton states 'in the IHS, 16 percent of inequality was attributable to the rural-urban gap; in the UNHS, this rises to 24 percent' (2001:15). Put another way, 76% of inequality in the UNHS survey was not attributable to the rural-urban gap, but to intra-rural or intra-urban inequality. The significance of this is underlined by Appleton's assertion that 'The rise in inequality implies that all reduction in poverty between the first and last surveys can be attributed to growth rather than redistribution.' (2001:16). Were such an assessment available at District level, it surely would have an impact on the local politics of poverty reduction.

In summary, two observations can be made in relation to the UNHS impact on local poverty perceptions. Firstly, suitably adjusted to take account of the relationship between expenditure and poverty, the UNHS appears to be able to detect poverty trends and redistributive effects, and hence could generate indicators of 'pro-poor' growth. Secondly, however, the interpretation of, and accountability for, these indicators may be obscured because analysis will be undertaken for geographical units much larger than those for which poverty reduction actions are being managed.

Poverty Research : The Ugandan Participatory Poverty Assessment

The Ugandan Participatory Poverty Assessment Programme (UPPAP) was initiated in 1998 with a review of participatory poverty assessment exercises that had been undertaken earlier in Tanzania. The UPPAP methodology was adopted by the Ugandan Ministry of Finance, Planning and Economic Development (MFPED) and, in an initial round (UPPAP1), Oxfam was contracted to implement it in 9 districts over a three-year period. A second round (UPPAP2) was undertaken in 12 districts in 2001-2. The aim of UPPAP1 was "to bring the voices and perspectives of the poor into central and local governments' policy formulation, planning and implementation, as well as strengthen and complement quantitative monitoring of the planning and implementation processes." (Ssendaula, 2000:vii). In order to achieve this, field researchers were contracted from nine different Ugandan 'partners', of which five were NGOs, three were research organisations, and one (Uganda Bureau of Statistics) was a government department. These participated in a planning workshop and then joined field staff seconded by each of the 9 districts in a three-week residential training programme "to create a shared vision for the project" and to gain "theoretical and practical knowledge in participatory methodologies" (UPPAP, 2000:6). The 36

researchers then undertook participatory research in a total of 24 rural and 12 urban sites over a period of eight months, with a team of six researchers covering four sites over a 35-day period and each site being researched by a 'sub-team' of three.

UPPAP2 adopted much the same approach in a total of 60 sites and with slightly modified aims, stated as: "to deepen the understanding of poverty and poverty trends gained in the first PPA; and to investigate people's experiences with selected government policies" (UPPAP, 2002:1).

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

The information gathered during the site research was recorded in daily reports, subsequently compiled as site reports. The four site reports were then to be synthesised as district reports, from which the national report was to be generated. In fact, Yates and Okello (2002) observe that in UPPAP1 the district reports were often produced relatively slowly, while the site reports were being used directly as sources for the national UPPAP report, published in 2000 (UPPAP, 2000). This last demonstrates the importance and urgency attached to the UPPAP by central government (notably the MFPED) and by international funders of the programme, among which DFID was prominent. This interest is also reflected in the substantial literature which has quickly emerged analysing the UPPAP process as well as its findings (Brock et al, 2002, 2003; McGee, 2003; Yates and Okello, 2002). The following discussion draws on this literature as well as upon the national report (UPPAP, 2002) and a synthesis of site reports (Yates and Moncreiffe, 2002) for UPPAP2.

Much of the analysis of UPPAP has focussed on its impact on policy (Brock et al, 2002, 2003; Brock and McGee, 2002). There has been rather less discussion of

whether the methodology itself could have been implemented differently, with different results. Below, I suggest that, from a research standpoint, there are grounds for arguing that the methodology could produce a different emphasis to the way poverty is conceptualised in Uganda. First, however, it is worth briefly summarising the impact of the UPPAP.

Perhaps the most important effect of UPPAP has been to legitimise the PEAP, and to validate the use of 'participatory' approaches to measuring and analysing poverty. Thus, the "messages on priority areas for intervention" that conclude the UPPAP1 national report (UPPAP, 2000:138) state: "The PEAP priorities are in line with those of the poor...". Yates and Okello (2002) also observe that, although the UPPAP raised the importance of water and sanitation investment within the PEAP, it otherwise simply confirmed the pre-existing PEAP priorities. Brock et al (2002) suggest the national report used the PEAP findings selectively, downplaying or avoiding the more politically sensitive issues, such as land tenure rights. Yates and Okello (2002) also argue that the UPPAP yielded different results to different stakeholders: for international funders it provided a greater understanding of poverty; for MFPED it provided monitoring information on the 'pro-poor' performance of spending ministries. This interpretation is interesting in that it locates the leadership of the pro-poor agenda within the MFPED, a view reinforced by Brock et al (2002) who go further and identify it with a small number of key individuals within that ministry. All writers also appear to agree that the influence of UPPAP upon local perceptions of poverty has been negligible. This is consistent with Yates and Okello's (2002) observation of the limited involvement of District officials with UPPAP. Overall, therefore, the impact of UPPAP on perceptions of poverty appeared greatest among those agencies who had promoted it at the outset, and then principally where it confirmed existing policy priorities. I will now consider the UPPAP methodology from the point of view of research in order to explore whether the methodology could have other outcomes.

As suggested in the quote from Ssendaula (2000) at the start of this section, UPPAP methodology, in common with the PRA approach on which it is based, has always been defined as distinct from quantitative research approaches such as the survey methodology used for the UNHS. Moreover, the use of field techniques inspired by

ethnography, such as semi-structured interviews, link UPPAP to qualitative research methodology. This suggests that an appropriate framework within which to assess the UPPAP findings on poverty would be that of qualitative research.

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

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

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

This further illustrates the importance of clarity of purpose, and also of researchers' understanding of the nature of qualitative method and the role within it of researcher's own reflexive judgements. In certain of its formulations the 'participatory' method obscures this issue, for example where a reflexive acknowledgement of the researcher's own biases (which identifies more than one point of view in a non-normative way) becomes equated with a 'recognition of one's own limits and the willingness to embrace error' (Blackburn and Holland, 1998:146, quoted in McGee,

2002:21) that privileges another's viewpoint (typically that of 'the poor') in a normative way. This latter interpretation is evident in UPPAP2: "The report attempts to capture the voices of the poor without placing judgements on the information or biasing the representation of local insights during the analysis and reporting." (UPPAP, 2002:1).

The point of Yates and Moncreiffe's comment quoted above is that simply reproducing the perception of the poor is only part of an understanding of poverty, along with the perceptions of poverty by others, such as the non-poor and the researcher. This highlights the central importance in qualitative research of a capacity for relatively sophisticated analytical skills among those undertaking interviews. It is a requirement that contrasts with questionnaire surveys, where questionnaire design and analysis are separate from the interview process itself, and the highly structured nature of the latter allows the possibility that they be conducted by 'enumerators' whose level of decision-making during interview is much lower than that required by semi-structured interviews characteristic of qualitative research. In this sense, the use of relatively inexperienced field researchers, with experienced researchers in a support role, generally away from the interview context, is a significant weakness in the way the methodology was implemented in UPPAP. It also suggests that, although nominally rooted in ethnographic, qualitative methodology, the UPPAP was designed - and interpreted - more like a questionnaire survey.

This is also apparent in the national reports of UPPAP findings (UPPAP, 2000, 2002) which emphasise quantified aggregate 'top ten' rankings of particular 'causes' and 'effects' of poverty determined by the relative frequency (number of sites) with which particular aspects of poverty were mentioned. This raises a number of problems of validity of representation. Firstly, the findings are based primarily upon attitudes and opinions - and in aggregate therefore constitute an opinion poll - which are inherently less reliable than information about behaviour (Appleton and Booth, 2001). Secondly, the impression is given that the rankings somehow describe the relative extent of these 'causes' of poverty nationally. In fact, all but two of the districts included in UPPAP1 were chosen purposefully as the 'poorest' according to a series of criteria. In contrast, districts chosen for UPPAP2 were selected partly on grounds of geographical representativity, partly to encompass a spread of poorer and better-off districts, and

partly to focus on particular problems (e.g. HIV/AIDS, insecurity). Since the selection cannot strictly be considered nationally representative, it cannot be used to 'represent' a national picture in a quantified, aggregate sense. Moreover, since the criteria for selection differed between UPPAP1 and UPPAP2, comparisons between aggregate rankings of "most frequently mentioned causes of poverty" in terms of poverty trends, as in the national report for UPPAP2 (UPPAP, 2002:15-16), can have little validity.

Thirdly, in addition to these problems of aggregation to represent a 'national' picture, national reports make no attempt to differentiate between the frequency with which particular aspects of poverty were raised in large 'community' meetings compared to smaller discussions with specific social groups, despite "particular emphasis...on conducting discussions and exercises separately with women, men, young people and the elderly." (UPPAP, 2002:5). Problems of aggregation are also raised by the site information catalogued by Yates and Moncrieffe (2002), which makes clear that hugely disparate poverty contexts make the aggregate meaningless. The UPPAP2 sites, for example, include Kamama (Kitgum District) where a 'local' population of 700 lives with long-term 'internally displaced' people numbering 11000, and Bubanda (Mubende District) where population has halved due to outmigration during the past decade. Under these circumstances, it seems questionable what an aggregation of 'causes of poverty' might mean. Even where synthesis of site reports attempts to compile (but not aggregate) information 'thematically' (eg natural resources, education), the effect is to fragment the site-specific picture to such an extent that it is 'decontextualised' and it becomes difficult to understand the connections (and hence causality) between different aspects of poverty. Again, this undermines one of the most important strengths of qualitative method: the ability to trace causality in complex social contexts.

It is important to recognise that the UPPAP reports do provide important information about poverty in Uganda. The report on UPPAP2 (UPPAP, 2002), in particular, provides graphic descriptions of poverty in Uganda: desperately poor fishermen who inhabit lakeside communities that combine public squalor with the burgeoning investments in restaurants, bars, 'video halls' of their employers, the wealthy boat-owners, and the continual movement of refrigerated trucks taking fish to foreign-owned processing plants; the 'poorest of the poor' labourers on foreign-owned tea and

sugar plantations maintained in permanent casualisation by employers who flout even the most basic provisions of Ugandan employment law. Yates and Moncreiffe (2002) also catalogue many instances where vulnerable people are victims of exploitative or predatory behaviour: orphans physically or sexually abused or dispossessed of land by relatives or neighbours; widows expelled from pastoral communities on the death of their husband; disabled people barred from access to land; 'local' landholders charging exorbitant rents for land or housing to refugees.

However, despite the wealth of observation emerging from UPPAP, the 'findings' are essentially descriptive. While this is important, and identifies gaps in government policy, such as the absence of policy in relation to the land rights of internally displaced people (UPPAP, 2002:43), there is comparatively little interpretation of why, or even how, these poverty-creating processes are taking place. UPPAP2, for example, observes (UPPAP, 2002:57, 82, 95-6) that wealthy pastoralists are 'leasing land', thus privatising communal grazing land and making access to grazing for poorer pastoralists more difficult. Yet it offers no insight as to how the process of 'leasing' is achieved in terms of individual, government, or civil society action. Even where positive cases are identified (e.g the case of effective operation of taxation in Ntungamo district), no interpretation is offered as to why these cases perform better than others. The limitation of UPPAP to a largely descriptive role is consistent with the implementation of a 'qualitative' methodology in a 'quantitative' mould, with an emphasise on aggregation, rather than depth of interpretation of specific cases and contexts. UPPAP thus falls between quantitative and qualitative approaches and the validity of its findings is compromised as it offers neither (quantitative) descriptive rigour that would be derived from a representative sample, nor (qualitative) understanding of process that would be derived from ethnographic case study.

This critique of research method as implemented through the UPPAP does not negate the importance of undertaking local-level research to understand poverty and its causes, but, should there be a political commitment to reducing poverty, then I would argue that a more rigorous application of qualitative methodology would deliver a sharper analysis of poverty processes which would enable 'entry points' for effective pro-poor intervention to be identified more clearly. The most important departure from current practice would be to report the fieldwork in the form of case studies

linking historical and current processes and identifying the key dynamics of power and how they are exercised. The aim should be to identify what kinds of poverty-creating processes are at work in particular kinds of contexts (eg urban areas, areas subject to settlement by refugees or 'internally displaced people'), and then to ask: to what extent are these processes visible in similar or different contexts. This would produce not 'ill-health' as a cause of poverty, but a 'model' of what local processes prevent health care for the poor from improving. Rather than the descriptive conclusion 'the pump could not be maintained because the community maintenance committee had ceased to function', the research would be expected to answer 'why was this the case?' This is not to ignore or underestimate the complex and contested nature of available answers to that question, but it does offer an analytical insight that would be necessary to take further steps to identify existing and potential pro-poor actors or constituencies and explore ways to strengthen them. I would argue that focussing research goals on 'poverty-producing processes' both requires, and in turn would support, a shift in the discourse on poverty from a 'residual' model, in which people are poor because they have been 'left behind', 'left out', or 'forgotten', to a 'relational' model that perceives poverty as created by specific sets of social relations. The final section of this paper examines the imperative for such a shift in the context of decentralized government in Uganda.

Decentralization, Local Politics, and Poverty Reduction

In parallel to the UPPAP, a small number of studies on local governance following decentralization in Uganda (Francis and James, 2003; Brock et al, 2003) have begun to generate detailed empirical research that paints a sombre picture of patronage politics - characterised at its extreme as 'ethnic gangsterism' (Brock et al, 2003:24). It is a scenario in which, far from a monolithic state authority at local level, civil service technocrats are seen to be in continual negotiation with local politicians over their role and control of resources, and non-government organisations have their capacity for advocacy restrained by seeking their influence through local government contracts for service delivery. Further, the boundaries between these categories are blurred by the propensity of local politicians to set up NGOs in order to gain access to funding, and of local government officers to tender for contracted-out tasks from local government, such as tax-collection (Brock et al. 2003, Francis and James, 2003; UPPAP, 2002;).

The exploitative inclinations of local politicians appear subject to few local restraining forces, and still fewer that work to the benefit of vulnerable social groups, who include women, youth, displaced people, disabled people and ethnic minorities. These groups are not only excluded from representation and resources by formal barriers (e.g land rights, requirements for the use of English in meetings), but also by informal social processes ('lobbying', social drinking) that largely determine the outcome of formal proceedings (Brock et al, 2003).

It is not the intention here to slip into a stereotypical caricature of the politics of decentralized government in Uganda along the lines of Chabal and Deloz (1999), but the emerging picture of local governance outlined above provides little evidence to date that the pro-poor initiatives currently underway in Uganda are coming from anywhere other than central government. Indeed, the problem of reducing poverty appears to present a political challenge similar to that posed by Crook and Sverisson (2001) at the start of this paper, to: "engage actively with local politics....to challenge local elite resistance if necessary and to ensure full implementation". Or, as Brock et al (2003: 42) conclude: "policy is deeply political, and... challenging the apolitical presentation of orthodox development narratives may be necessary if structural changes are to occur."

Following this recognition, an important step is to re-assess the way poverty is conceptualised under 'apolitical orthodoxy'. A central argument of this paper is that this apolitical orthodoxy is underpinned by a discourse that understands poverty in 'residual' terms, and thus seeks solutions by making more visible or more audible those 'forgotten', 'left out' or 'left behind': through a research approach that privileges the 'voices of the poor'; and through a decentralization of governance that aims to bring the locus of decision-making closer to the lives of the poor. The paper further argues that a more rigorous methodological approach to poverty research offers a stronger prospect of challenging this orthodoxy than the current participatory poverty assessment methodology. In particular, a more rigorous application of qualitative research method would illuminate and reinforce an alternative 'relational' discourse that identifies poverty creating processes consistent with the evidence of growing inequality and discriminatory and exploitative behaviour towards vulnerable social groups in Ugandan society. An example of such shifts in discourse is the

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

From this starting point, two modifications to current research on poverty can be identified. Firstly, the job for a more rigorous methodology of 'Participatory Poverty Assessments' would appear to be to engage in the search for local pro-poor allies to support action to assist vulnerable groups. It is inescapable that research aimed at identifying ways to challenge local elite resistance to reducing poverty will carry considerable dangers. It will very likely not involve "participation of all community members" in the belief expressed by UPPAP2 that this will "ensure that the planning process responds to the specific needs of the poor." (UPPAP, 2002:170). Indeed, Adato et al. (2003), amplifying Mosse's (1994) earlier reflections on PRA, has argued that the public nature of PRA renders it too dangerous for the exploited to speak frankly. In order to do this, experienced researchers need to be directly involved in the field research, using a rigorous (albeit 'extractive') qualitative methodology which emphasises an understanding of how the different elements and processes of a context affect social and economic outcomes. Rather than seeking to contrive an aggregate analysis across sites, the presentation of detailed political 'scenarios' would be a more appropriate way to analyse such studies. Secondly, and *complementing* (cf Appleton and Booth, 2001) these political 'scenarios', the representation of poverty characteristics (including, for example, indicators of service delivery and poverty trends) both geographically and in time is more properly left to a rigorously designed surveys - appropriately modified, for example, to take full account of known relationships between expenditure and wellbeing. It needs to be acknowledged, however, that if decentralized government is to function as an accountable means of reducing poverty, then surveys to monitor poverty trends must be designed to allow indicators to be measured and compared for local government units charged with this responsibility.

References

- Adato M, Lund F and Mhlongo P (2003) Innovations in Mixed Method Research to Understand Poverty Dynamics: A Study from KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. Paper presented to conference "Staying Poor: Chronic Poverty and Development Policy." 7 to 9 April 2003 Chronic Poverty Research Centre, IDPM, University of Manchester
- Appleton S (2001) Poverty reduction during growth: the case of Uganda, 1992-2000. Unpublished paper, University of Nottingham.
- Appleton S and Booth D (2001) Combining Participatory and survey-based Approaches to Poverty Monitoring and analysis. Background Paper for the Workshop to be held in Entebbe, Uganda. 30 May, 1 June 2001.
- Brock (2002) Introduction. In Brock K and McGee R (eds) *Knowing Poverty. Critical Reflections on Participatory Research and Poverty*. Earthscan, London
- Brock K, McGee R and Ssewakiryanga R (2002) *Poverty Knowledge and Policy Processes: a case study of Ugandan national poverty reduction policy*. Research Report 53. Institute of Development Studies, Brighton.
- Brock K, McGee R, Adong Okech R and Ssuuna J (2003) *Poverty Knowledge and Policy Processes in Uganda: Case Studies from Bushenyi, Lira and Tororo Districts*. Research Report 54. Institute of Development Studies , Brighton.
- Chabal P and Daloz J-P (1999) *Africa Works. Disorder as Political Instrument*. James Currey, Oxford.
- Chambers R (1995) Participatory rural appraisal (PRA): challenges, potentials and paradigm. *World Development* 22(10) 1437-1454.
- Craig D and Porter D (2002) *Poverty reduction Strategy Papers: a new convergence*. *World Development* 31(1): 53-69.
- Crook R and Sverrisson A (2001) *Decentralization and Poverty Alleviation in Developing Countries: a comparative analysis, or, is West Bengal unique?* IDS Working Paper 130. Institute of Development Studies, Brighton.
- Francis P and James R (2003) *Balancing Rural Poverty Reduction and Citizen Participation: the contradictions of Uganda's Decentralization Programme*. *World Development* 31(2) 325-337.

- Hossain N and Moore M (2001) Arguing for the poor: elites and poverty in developing countries. IDS Working Paper xxx, Institute of Development Studies, Brighton.
- Johnson C (2001) Local Democracy, Democratic Decentralization and Rural Development. *Development Policy Review*. 19 (4) 521-532
- McGee R (2002) The self in participatory poverty research. In: Brock K and McGee R (eds) *Knowing Poverty. Critical Reflections on Participatory Research and Poverty*. Earthscan, London
- McGee R (2003) What has happened to poverty in Uganda? Contradiction, confusion and the quest for complementarity. Unpublished paper.
- McGee R and Norton A (1999) Participation in Poverty Reduction Strategies: a synthesis of Experience with Participatory Approaches to Policy Design, Implementation and Monitoring. Working Paper 109, Institute of Development Studies, Brighton.
- MAAIF / MFPEd (2000) Ministry of Agriculture, Animal Industry and Fisheries (MAAIF) and Ministry of Finance, Planning and Economic Development (MFPEd). *Plan for Modernization of Agriculture: Eradicating Poverty in Uganda. Government Strategy and Operational Framework*. Kampala, Uganda.
- MFPEd (2000) Ministry of Finance, Planning and Economic Development (MFPEd),. *Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper*. Kampala, March 2000.
- MFPEd (2001) Ministry of Finance, Planning and Economic Development (MFPEd), *Poverty Eradication Action Plan (2001-2003) Volume 1*. Kampala, February 2001.
- Mosse D (1994) Authority, Gender, and Knowledge: theoretical reflections on the Practice of PRA. *Development and Change* 25 (3) 405-435.
- Narayan D, with R Patel, K Schaft, A Rademacher and S Koch-Schulte (2000) *Voices of the Poor: Can Anyone Hear Us?* New York: published for the World Bank, Oxford University Press
- Okello L (2000) Acknowledgement. Learning from the Poor. Uganda Participatory Poverty Assessment Report. Ministry of Finance, Planning and Economic Development, Kampala.

- Ssendaula G (2000) Foreword. Learning from the Poor. Uganda Participatory Poverty Assessment Report. Ministry of Finance, Planning and Economic Development, Kampala.
- UPPAP (2000) Learning from the Poor. Uganda Participatory Poverty Assessment Report. Ministry of Finance, Planning and Economic Development, Kampala.
- UPPAP (2002) National Report, December 2002, Uganda Participatory Poverty Assessment Process. Ministry of Finance, Planning and Economic Development, Kampala.
- Yates J and Moncreiffe J (2002) Synthesis of PPA2 Cycle 1 Findings. Uganda Participatory Poverty Assessment Process.
- Yates J and Okello L (2002) Learning from Uganda's efforts to learn from the poor: Reflections and lessons from the Uganda Participatory Poverty Assessment Project. In Brock K and McGee R (eds) Knowing Poverty. Critical Reflections on Participatory Research and Poverty. Earthscan, London