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Conceptualising Poverty in Poverty Reduction Projects: Experience from the South West Region of Cameroon

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Abstract:

The outcome of poverty reduction projects (PRPs) largely depends on the way poverty is conceptualized. Research has shown that there are usually discrepancies in the way poverty is conceptualized in PRPs and the way poor women and men perceive poverty. Using empirical data, this paper highlights the fact that this difference in the conceptualization of poverty negatively affects the success of PRPs. The paper contributes to the debate that to increase the success rate of poverty reduction projects, poverty has to be conceptualized from the point of view of the poor.

Keywords: Gaps, conceptualization, poverty, poverty reduction, the poor

1. Introduction and Problem

The constant and high number of people living in poverty makes poverty a topical issue in development debates and poverty reduction a fundamental development goal. Consequently global concern towards poverty reduction is reaffirmed by its prime position in the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). In sub-Saharan Africa poverty is said to be worse than in any other region except South Asia, increasing in both absolute numbers and severity (Breth, 1997; Ramphela, 2006); the reason why African leaders initiated the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD) in Libya, 2001. In this initiative, African leaders pledged, based on a common vision and a firm shared conviction, that African Nations have "a pressing duty to eradicate poverty and to place their countries, both individually and collectively, on a path of sustainable growth and development" (NEPAD, 2001:1). The leaders acknowledged that the poverty situation of Africa stands in stark contrast to the prosperity of the developed world. According to FAO (2010:11), of the 925 million people hungry worldwide, 239 million are in sub-Saharan Africa, making 30% of its population. This means that one out of every three persons in sub-Saharan Africa is hungry. The above situation, therefore makes the reduction of poverty in Africa very imperative.

At the country level, the UNDP 2013 Human Development Report ranked Cameroon 150th of 186 countries with about a third of the population living below the poverty threshold of US\$1.25 a day in 2009 (UNDP, 2013). Earlier reports by the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD, 2001) had shown that although the poverty level of Cameroon had improved from 51% in 1996 to 40% in 2001, poverty still remains a major issue in Cameroon with grave consequences on its populace. This improvement of the poverty situation mainly benefitted people who live in urban area, of whom 22.1% are poor, compared to 49.9% of poor people in rural area. Thus, poverty in Cameroon stands out as a fundamental rural phenomenon. According to the National Institute of Statistics (NIS, 2008: 2) about 55% of households of rural households in Cameroon are poor due to inadequate access to basic infrastructure and drastic fall in income levels of rural farmers. Nonetheless, the main determinants of poverty in Cameroon remain the lack of jobs, inadequate basic economic infrastructure like roads, poor access to land for agro-pastoral activities, widespread corruption and bad management of public resources. The poverty threshold per adult per day in 2007 stood at 738 CFAF (approximately US\$1.5) making 22,454 CFA francs (US\$45) per month and 269, 443 CFA francs (US\$540) per year (NIS, 2008:6). This amount is the minimum required to meet an individual's basic needs and it includes consumption both in kind and in cash.

The profile of poverty in Cameroon is characterised by three indicators. First is the poverty rate, which measures at 39.9%, which is indicative of the percentage of the population living under the poverty threshold. Second is the depth of poverty which stands at 12.3% revealing the average gap between annual spending on consumption per adult equivalent of poor households and the poverty threshold. The third indicator is the severity of poverty which is estimated at 5%, reflecting the level of inequalities among the poor.

These statistics show that of the 17.9 million Cameroonians in 2007, about 40% (7.1 million) lived under the national poverty line (NIS, 2008:6).

The government of Cameroon like most countries in sub-Saharan Africa has been very involved in reducing poverty and improving on the livelihood of its citizens. According to the Cameroon Vision 2035 (MINEPAT, 2009), when the economic crisis broke out in 1985, the government embarked on an economic revival process with donor assistance. The government carried out some stabilization and structural adjustment programmes which led to the discontinuation of medium and long-term initiatives and planning. Cameroon therefore went through a long period of re-adjustment with successive reforms like the privatization of state-owned corporations, the reduction of salaries for civil servants, etc. The majority opinion holds that the structural adjustment and stabilization packages did little or nothing to improve on the lives of Cameroonians (Fonchingong, 1999).

With the failure of the Structural Adjustment Packages and other stabilization packages, the Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (PRSP) was introduced. The government of Cameroon completed its full PRSP in 2003 (Baye, 2005). The Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (PRSP) emphasized macro-economic and sector strategies and was aimed at accelerating growth, reducing poverty and helping Cameroon achieve the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). The macro-economic and sector strategies were done through the implementation of diverse poverty reduction projects. It is the satisfactory implementation of the above strategies, according to the Cameroon Ministry of the Economy, Plan and Regional Development, known by its French acronym MINEPAT that led to Cameroon attaining the completion point of the Heavily Indebted Poor Country initiative (HIPC) in 2006. This further enabled a significant cancellation of the country's debt (MINEPAT, 2008). However, the above efforts and growth recovery have not been strong enough to reduce poverty in the short term as noted that 40% of Cameroonians still live under the national poverty line and the country is ranked 150th out of 186 countries by the UNDP 2013 Human Development Report. What this means is that poverty reduction projects carried out so far have not impacted positively on the livelihood of the poor as expected. That is, these projects have not been able to transform poor Cameroonians into non-poor.

Debates on poverty reveal its multidimensional nature (Chambers, 1997; Maxwell, 1999; Chant, 2003) and further emphasized the fact that poverty reduction strategies need to address this diversity in order to maximize their success. Thin (2004) explains that poverty reduction involves reducing the number of poor people and/or transforming poor people into non-poor. This process requires an understanding of the specific characteristics of poverty in the given community and also understanding that the root causes and structural factors of poverty are addressed in poverty reduction interventions. Cornwall and Brock (2005) on their part insist that poverty reduction must focus on improving the social, economic and environmental conditions of the poor and their access to decision making. Despite the established multidimensional nature of poverty that goes beyond the use of income measures as proxies for poverty, poverty reduction projects and policies still concentrate a lot on material poverty that have measurable dimensions and not on the social dimensions of poverty (CIDA, 1996; Thin, 2004). However, scholarly works (Dewitt, 1977; Chambers, 1983, 1997; ILO, 1997) have shown that macro-policies that inform development and poverty reduction projects have for a long time been ridden with errors. These policies have often reflected widely held views that are usually the views of the powerful. Development professionals often use their own experiences, their realities, their constructs and their interpretation of realities to develop macro development policies. According to Chambers (1997) professionals and local people generally differ in their values and preferences. "What local people, especially the poor, want and need, is often not what they are thought by professionals to want and need" (Chambers, 1997:179). Poverty reduction projects therefore are usually not conceived from the point of view of the poor. They are mostly top-down and are designed only with an imagination of what poor people want. It is therefore imperative that projects designed to improve on the livelihood of the poor be conceived from the point of view of the poor with their needs and conception of poverty being the main source of inspiration of the project. Using the SOWEDA Livestock and Fisheries Development Project (LFDP), whose main objective is to reduce poverty among beneficiaries, the paper investigates into how the differences and similarities in the conceptualization of poverty by the poor and in poverty reduction projects affects the success of projects and poverty status of beneficiaries.

2. Literature Review

There has been some diversity in the way poverty has been conceived, and understood by scholars and development agents. Many scholarly works have focused on presenting these different views which are very vital for the success of programmes meant to reduce poverty (Chambers, 1997; Bamberger et al., 2001; Kasenke, 2002). What stands out from the debates on poverty is that the concept is not and has never been politically neutral (Chant, 2003). Poverty has usually reflected a priori assumptions of those undertaking the evaluation. According to Nji (2004), poverty has mostly been operationalised in economic terms and this can be very limiting because poverty includes issues of unemployment, loss of income as well as unsatisfactory quality of life, lack of access to decent housing, clean drinking water, electricity, health services and poor human living condition. Chambers (1997) on his part presents poverty as a form of deprivation either in relation to some basic minimum needs or in relation to the resources needed to meet these minimum basic needs. To be poor is to be deprived of the means for a decent life. These deprivations include income deprivation which is the lack of means to purchase basic goods and services; consumption deprivation which is inadequate access to basic goods and services; capability deprivation which is insufficient knowledge, health or skills to fulfill normal livelihood functions, and living conditions deprivation which relates to poor housing, unhealthy or dangerous environment etc. The poor themselves characterize poverty as "ill being" that is said to come from constant deprivation of basic necessities of life and as presented by Ramphelle (2006), they use phrases like 'not having enough to eat; wearing tattered clothes; lack of access to livelihood resources; dilapidated housing' etc. to describe their condition. Poverty is also multidimensional because deprivations do not only relate to basic material resources such as

food, shelter and medical treatment, but also to social resources such as access to education, information and respect. The idea of poverty being a relative deprivation is widely accepted (Maxwell, 1999).

Nolan and Whelan (1996: 193) further see poverty more as the inability to participate in the society due to lack of resources. Their view of poverty rests on the lack of resources that limits poor people's full participation in the society. This view, according to the UK Coalition Against Poverty is very limiting because it excludes aspects emphasized by the poor themselves. These aspects include lack of voice, lack of respect and self-esteem, isolation and humiliation as well as non-material elements found in the UN definitions such as non-participation in decision-making, violation of human dignity, powerlessness, susceptibility to violence, etc. However, the latter conditions are not unique to conditions of poverty but are also associated with other conditions such as racism, ethnicity and gender.

Sen (1990: 114) is another writer whose definition of poverty has greatly influenced the shift from income, economic growth and GDP to lack of choices and opportunities for a tolerable life. According to Sen, 'income' and 'living standards' don't matter in their own rights, but as a means to what matters (the kind of life one is able to live and the choices and opportunities that are available for one). That is the 'functioning' of a person (what a person actually manages to do or be in terms of participation and achievements) and the 'capabilities' of a person (what a person can do or be in the range of choices open to him or her) are what makes income important. Critical here is the freedom to choose. Income, therefore, is only important if the person is able to translate it to 'functionings' and/or 'capabilities' and this ability according to Sen depends on personal factors such as age, sex, health, disability etc.

Relating income to a person's ability to live the kind of life that he/she values, present income as a means to an end and also focuses on the individual's ability thereby, making gender inequalities more visible. Nevertheless, Sen (1997:87) later challenges this capability theory when he acknowledges that, defining poverty as capability or capability failure may be misleading because there are situations of capability failure that are not related to income. For example a wealthy man's ability to do can be constrained by ill health and this cannot be considered as poverty. Sen's capability approach to poverty, thus enhances our understanding of poverty, but it needs to be used with caution. Poverty also presents in different types.

In presenting the different types of poverty, Rees & Smith (1998) divide poverty into relative and absolute poverty. In this division, relative poverty is defined as poverty in relation to the situation of another. It is thus a situation of relative deprivation. Its measurement is a matter of social equity, reducing social inequalities and differences in wealth, living conditions and opportunities. The idea of relative poverty being a matter of social inequality is further underscored by Townsend (1993:36) who says that relative poverty comes as a result of relative deprivation. Relative deprivation occurs when a person cannot obtain sufficiently the conditions of life (diets, amenities, standards, services etc.) which allows them to participate fully as members of the society.

Absolute poverty on the other hand, according to Rees and Smith (1998), refer to poverty, defined according to income which provides a minimum set of resources that a person needs to survive. The United Nations also defines absolute poverty in terms of survival. It characterizes it as 'severe deprivation of basic human needs, including food, safe drinking water, health, shelter, education, information, access to social services, income etc.' (UN 1995: para 19). In this definition, a poverty line is determined and anyone that falls below this line is poor. This point of view that defines poverty as absolute is rejected by Nji (2004) who believes that poverty is relative rather than absolute. He insists that 'A' can only be said to be poor only when his or her position is compared to that of 'B' in relation to material benefits and social position. The World Bank (WB) on its part defines poverty in a more practical and simplified manner. Poverty to the WB is hunger, lack of shelter, being sick, not being able to see a doctor; it is not having access to school and not knowing how to read; it is the fear for the future. For poverty to be determined, it has to be measured. As Ravallion (2006) posits, there are many ways of measuring poverty the most common of which is the head count index, given by the proportion of the population living in households with the consumption of income below a predetermined poverty line. This measure, however does not qualify poverty, it says nothing about the people that live below the poverty line i.e. if the poorest person gets poorer, the headcount index will not change (Ravallion, 2006).

In trying to standardize the measurement of global poverty, the World Bank used the Purchasing Power Parity (PPP), which adjusts for differences in the prices of goods and services between countries, to define an international poverty line of US\$1 a day for African countries and US\$2 per day for middle income economies such as East Asia and Latin America. PPP as defined by WB is 'a method of measuring the relative purchasing power of different countries' currencies over the same types of goods and services'. Because goods and services may cost more in one country than the other, PPP allows us to make more accurate comparisons of standards of living.

However, Ramphelle (2006) argues that traditional measures of poverty are inadequate for the task of capturing the sense of ill-being depicted by those experiencing deprivation; this being the case, the \$1 a day poverty line used by the World Bank and other international institutions becomes both methodologically and conceptually problematic. The problem with this measurement as Dercon (2006) posits is with the fact that it is making comparisons between groups or countries and between periods rather than with the poverty of an individual or individuals. This leaves out the multidimensional aspect of poverty, and some of the not-so-easily quantifiable elements of poverty. It also makes the measurement of poverty to largely depend on the more quantifiable dimensions of livelihood/wellbeing which are; education, access to water, nutrition, income etc. and misses out on aspects like lack of voice, lack of respect and self-esteem, isolation and humiliation, vulnerability etc. which are not quantifiable. These are the aspects that the feminist perspective of poverty insists on.

The concept of poverty cannot be totally understood without the feminist perspective. As posited by Chant (2003), the conceptualization of poverty as a multidimensional phenomenon recognizes that subjective experiences of poverty and the processes which give rise to these experiences must constitute part of the framework. This has opened up greater space for incorporating a gender dimension into poverty analysis. Kabeer (1997:1) notes that; "poverty has not always been analyzed from a gender perspective.

Prior to the feminist contributions to poverty analysis, the poor were either seen as composed entirely of men or else women's needs and interests were assumed to be identical to, and hence subsumable under, those of male household heads".

3. Method

This article is based on a study carried out between October 2012 and January 2013 in the South West Region of Cameroon. The South West Region (SWR) is one of the two English speaking regions in Cameroon (the other eight regions are French speaking) with headquarters in Buea. It has six divisions (Meme, Fako, Ndian, Kupe-Muanenguba, Lebialem and Manyu) and twenty-seven subdivisions. The SWR had a total population of 1,316,079 as of the 2005 official census (BUCREP, 2010) making 7.5% of the total population of Cameroon. The region is the seat of huge agro-industries and companies like the Cameroon Development Corporation (CDC), the Cameroon Tea Estate (CTE), PAMOL Plantation and the National oil refinery known by its French acronym, SONARA etc. These agro-industries and companies have attracted a lot of people looking for employment and this has made the region very cosmopolitan. Apart from those in formal employment, the greater population of the SWR is largely involved in farming and small and medium size businesses.

The South West Development Authority (SOWEDA) was purposefully selected for the study because it is the main institution created by the government of Cameroon to take charge of the development of the South West Region. The Livestock and Fisheries Development Project was a mega project carried out by SOWEDA in the region with the goal of reducing poverty. The project concentrated on livestock and fisheries development because these are major economic activities of the region. The project lasted from the year 2000 – 2007 and was jointly sponsored by the Arab Bank for Economic Development, the African Development Bank and the Government of Cameroon. Four of the six divisions were purposefully selected for this study. Fako and Ndian divisions were selected because they are two maritime divisions where fisheries and fish-farming activities are intense, and Meme and Manyu divisions were also selected because they had existing livestock cooperatives which shows the intensity of livestock activities in these divisions.

The study was Ex-Post-Facto and it assessed whether long term project objective of poverty reduction has been realized five years down the road. A sample of 168 men and women who had benefitted from the project were identified and studied. Respondents were selected using a stratified snowball sampling method. Beneficiaries of each selected division were stratified according to sex to ensure an equal representation of men and women and the respondents were selected from both strata of each division using the snowball method. Both qualitative and quantitative methods of data collection were employed in the study. The questionnaire was the main instrument for data collection and was administered on all 168 respondents. The questionnaire elicited information on how project beneficiaries experienced and perceived poverty; what they understand as poverty; whether they still considered themselves poor five years after the end of the project and why. The questionnaire further covered issues relating to the impact of the project on the lives of beneficiaries. The questionnaire was complemented by interviews conducted with some randomly selected respondents and also with the management of the implementing body, SOWEDA. Interview with SOWEDA management focused on how the project was conceived, designed and implemented and also on how poverty was conceived and operationalized in the project.

4. Results and Discussion

According to an in-depth interview, carried out with management of SOWEDA, a situational analysis was done to assess the poverty level of the population of the South West Region before the Livestock and Fisheries Development Project (LFDP) was conceived. This study was carried out by a hired consultant firm called Réseau d'Appui aux Micro Projets Agricoles et Ruraux (RAMPAR) in 1998. Based on the national poverty line of 148,000CFA francs adult equivalent, the survey by RAMPAR confirmed that "the South West Region was poor or at least vulnerable to poverty.... This was due to the inability of the population to provide for themselves the basic nutritional needs of 2,400cal/day in adult equivalent" (Nanko, 2007). SOWEDA therefore decided to create a poverty reduction project to negate poverty in the South West region.

In terms of concept and design of the project and as revealed during the interview with management, SOWEDA commissioned its staff to carry out feasibility studies in identified communities to "sample community opinion and identify their needs". In the conduct of the needs assessment, a series of meetings were held with various community stake holders "like the chiefs, heads of Sociocultural groups, leaders of Common Initiative Groups (CIGs) and Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) and cooperatives and other institutions with large membership". By implication, individuals who did not represent groups or occupy strategic positions were not directly part of the meetings. Management further revealed that group and NGO leaders represented their members, "the voices of women and men who do not belong to any groups or association were taken up by the chief who had proxy to speak for them" This form of consultation is not all inclusive as it left out the experiences, needs, opinions and voices of the masses, non-leaders and in particular the vulnerable group of the population of any community like women and children. The latter group due to the norms governing patriarchy constitutes the salient majority struggling to be heard or put their views across in matters of mainstream development. It is therefore logical to conclude that it was a huge mistake for SOWEDA to allow chiefs to speak on behalf of poor men and women who did not belong to groups and associations. Besides, most chiefs of the South West region, like in most parts of Cameroon and Africa, are men and enjoy relatively higher social status than most of their citizens and therefore have different needs, interests and aspirations. Given this context, it is unlikely that the opinions and priorities of the vulnerable persons who constitute the majority of the poor will count. We can therefore say that the project approach was faulty from the level of needs assessment.

Nevertheless, the consultations with different stakeholders enabled management to identify economic activities which might be of interest to some of the populace of the region. The priority activities observed, were livestock farming, fisheries and fish-farming. According to management, "these activities had not had enough attention and support and this was partly responsible for the poverty

situation of the region". It is important to note that the effort was made by management to determine if the proposed project addressed the concerns and problems of the communities. "Upon confirmation from the communities, the project was conceived and approved". As previously mentioned in another section of this article, SOWEDA LFDP was to contribute to the reduction of rural poverty and improve on the livelihood of women and men in the South West Region of Cameroon. Its development goal was to contribute significantly to food security in the region. In more specific term, the project sought to enhance livestock and fishery production and productivity in the region by at least 10% a year (that is, an average of 3,600 tons of meat and eggs and 8,750 tons of fish); raise farmers' income by about 130,000FCFA (US\$ 260.0) per household per year on average (Nanko, 2007). It was expected that this increase income would help reduce poverty through improve production of food for consumption and for sale and in turn improve on the livelihood of beneficiaries. Consequently poverty was associated with as low productivity of livestock and fishery activities, income deprivation associated with low income in livestock and fisheries activities and capability deprivation exhibited by lack of skills in livestock and fishery production. By so doing, the project sought to reduce poverty through capacity building training in livestock and fisheries activities, increasing productivity of beneficiaries in livestock and fisheries activities and increasing the income of beneficiaries.

The project invested on the training of livestock and fisheries farmers on things like monogastric farming, modern broiler production, hygiene and sanitation, livestock norms, animal feed formation, integrated fish farming, fish preservation technique, fishery resource management and conservation, cost-benefit analysis, engine repairs, maintenance and navigation at sea, management of cold stores and ice plants, fish pond construction, water quality management in fish ponds, marketing of fish products and book-keeping. It also constructed basic infrastructures for use by livestock and fisheries farmers like abattoirs, open air slaughtering areas, butcher stores, cold stores and ice plants and also warehouses for fish mongers; and gave out loans to beneficiaries.

The fundamental question is did all these endeavours affect the poverty situation of beneficiaries positively? To effectively respond to this question, the research attempted to find out if both SOWEDA and beneficiaries had a common concept of poverty. Analysis of field data on respondents' understanding of poverty revealed that although the majority of respondents (above 85%) related poverty to income and material deprivation (not having any cash, not being able to educate children, not being able to go to the hospital when ill), more than one-third related poverty to less quantifiable issues like feeling vulnerable (35.7%) and lacking self-esteem (38.7%). Respondents also saw poverty as social deprivation (lack of portable water and electricity and lack of opportunities) as indicated in

Understanding of poverty				n	%
Not having any cash				164	97.6
Not able to educate children				161	95.8
Not able to go to hospital when ill				146	87.0
Lack of a decent home				62	37.0
Not able to eat three meals a day				33	19.6
A feeling of vulnerability				60	35.7
Lack of portable water and electricity				27	16.1
Lack of self esteem				65	38.7
Lack of a voice				47	28.0
Lack of opportunities				21	12.5

Table 1: Conceptualization of poverty by respondents

Source: Field work

A substantial proportion of women (Table 2) associated poverty to psychological and less quantifiable notions like 'lack of self esteem' (60%), 'lack of a voice' (45%) and 'feeling of vulnerability' (25%). Whereas the 'lack of a decent home' was an important poverty indicator for men (44%), only 29.8% women related the two.

Perception of poverty	Response			
	Female		Male	
	n	%	n	%
Not having any cash	81	96.4	83	98.8
Not being able to educate children	81	96.4	80	95.2
Not being able to go to the hospital when ill	67	79.8	79	94.1
Lack of a decent home	25	29.8	37	44.0
Not being able to eat three meals a day	16	19.0	17	20.2
A feeling of vulnerability	43	25.6	17	20.2
Lack of portable water and electricity	9	10.7	18	21.4
Lack of self esteem	50	59.5	15	17.9
Lack of a voice	38	45.2	9	10.1
Lack of opportunities	14	16.7	7	8.3

Table 2: Gender Disaggregation of respondents' conception of poverty
Source: Fieldwork

Further interrogation, during interviews, revealed men’s attachment to material things and women’s concerns with social issues. This is because while many males further saw poverty as ‘lacking the good things of life’ (good food, clothing, cars a home) and ‘not being able to enjoy yourself as you want’, many women saw it more as ‘living in a dirty and crowded neighbourhood’, ‘feeling useless’ and being always ill. In-depth interview on the respondents’ understanding of poverty also showed that male respondents were very particular about material poverty or income deprivation. The male respondent in Fako Division, said “poverty is not having money. Cash is very difficult to have these days and that is the major problem”. He said “I still live in the temporal and the floorless house that I inherited from my father more than fifteen years ago ... I have not been able to change even one plank on it because I am poor”. Another male respondent, this time from Meme division, said that “without a regular source of income, it is very difficult for me to address my problems.... This chicken business is seasonal and sometimes I don’t even cover cost, talk less of making a profit so how can I get out of poverty”. The male respondent from Manyu said that “although I can feed my family and take care of their health situation, university education for my children has been a major challenge. Only two of my six children have been to the university and that almost killed me”.

One woman from Ndian Division made it clear that “it is very bad for a woman to be poor because she will become too dependent on her husband and he will easily get fed-up with her. She will become a pest to him and neither he nor his family will respect her”. This view of poverty was also shared by another woman respondent this time from Manyu division who said that “poverty is like a disease that eats you up completely and renders you useless before your friends, family and community...a poor woman is extremely vulnerable to all the odds in the community”. One other woman said “the world now is too fast for some of us. How can I catch up when I don’t have good health and education? Some of us will just die poor with no hope”. All respondents from Ndian division, said that life is very difficult and expensive. “You can see for yourself how bad the road is” said the female respondent from Bekora village in Ndian division. “By the time goods get here they are so expensive that we can barely survive”, she added. (See Figure 1).



Figure 1: Road from Ekondo-Titi through Lobe Palms Estate to Bekora village in Ndian Division Nov. 2012
Picture by Dorothy Forsac

Following their understanding of poverty which included; not having any cash, not being able to educate children, not being able to go to the hospital when ill, lack of a decent home, not being able to eat three meals a day, a feeling of vulnerability, lack of portable water and electricity, lack of self esteem, lack of a voice and lack of opportunities, respondents' were asked to evaluate their situations prior to the project. A substantive majority (82%) of respondents claimed that they were poor. By gender, 44% of the respondents were women while 38% were men; the rest 18% did not consider themselves poor but were however part of the project. (See Figure 2).

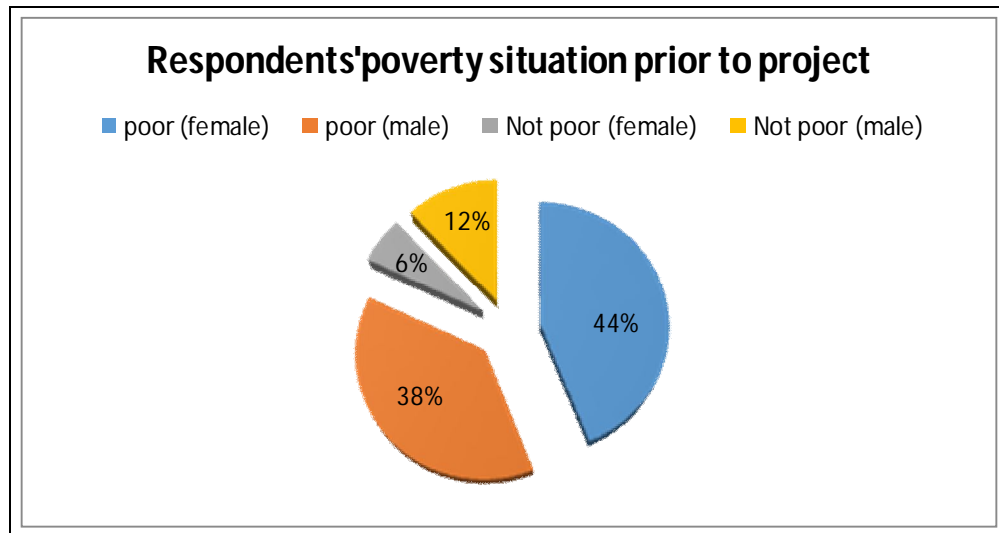


Figure 2: Respondents' poverty situation prior to the project.
Source: Field work

About five years after the end of the project the poverty situation remain the same for 60% of respondents; a decline of 22%. This was the case as reported by 31% of women and about 29% of men. 40 % said that they were no longer poor, meaning that the project impacted and transformed the lives of 22% of respondents. This percentage plus the 18% who initially acknowledged that they were not poor (see Figure 3).

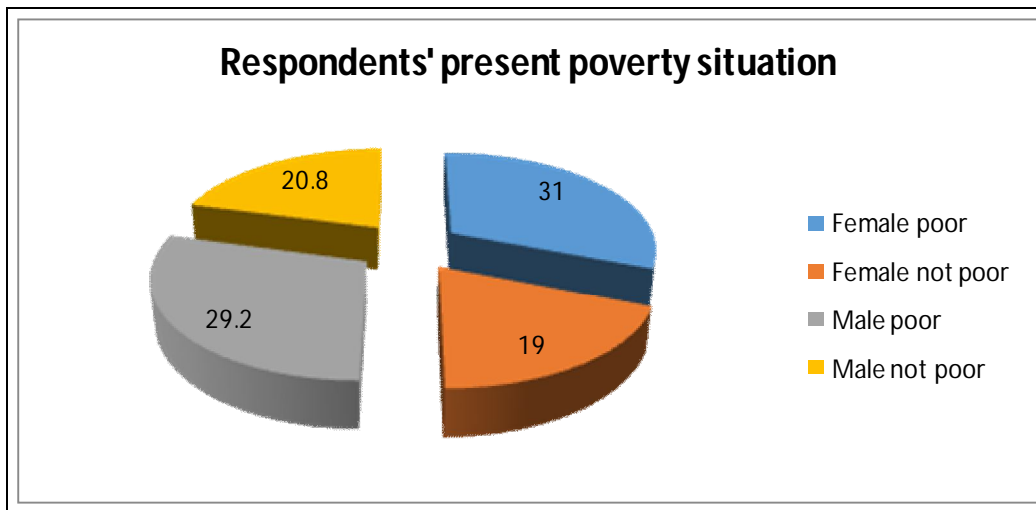


Figure 3: Respondents' present poverty situation
Source: Field work

A more detailed analysis revealed during data collection religion greatly influenced the responses of many respondents who said that they were not poor. the researcher observed that despite visible signs of poverty (looking malnourished, dilapidated houses, tattered clothes), many respondents (especially women) said that they were not poor. Further interrogation revealed that for many women respondents, accepting that one is poor equals being ungrateful to God who had given them life. (See Figure 4)



Figure 4: Despite visible poverty this respondent insisted that she is not poor because God had given her life

On the whole women and men disagreed that the project was able to address all their poverty needs or that it was enough to get them or their communities out of poverty. They were not satisfied with the project and disagreed that the project had the potential to empower the poor. Not surprising 63% of respondents did not think that the project was a good one while about 13% were not certain. The rest 24%, however, thought that the project was good (see figure 5).

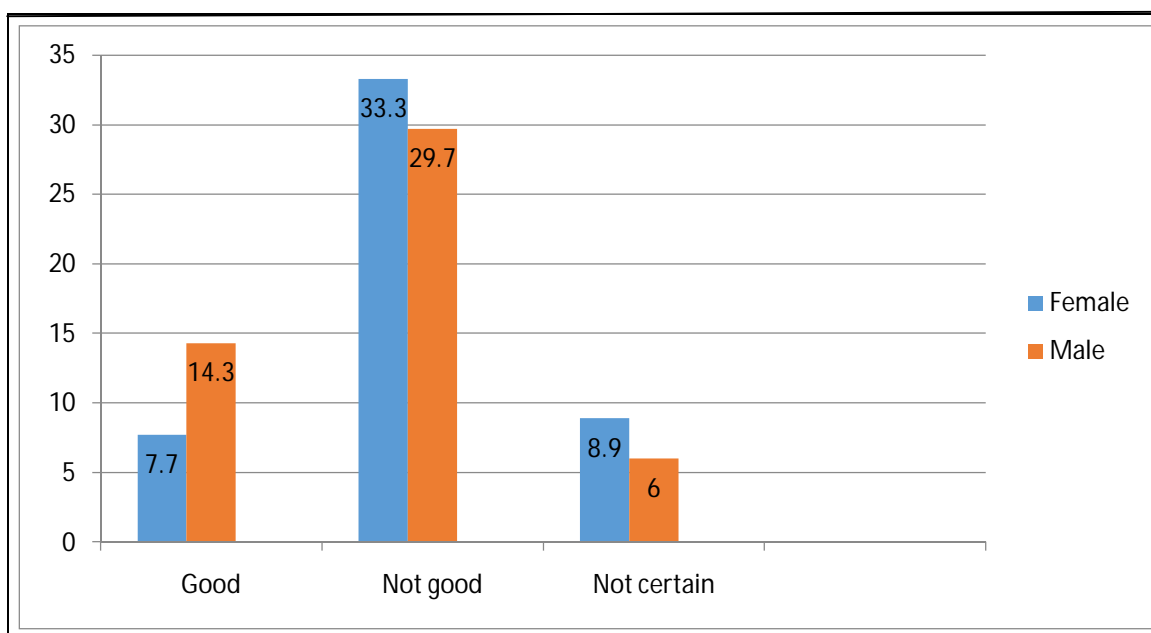


Figure 5: Respondents' Judgment of the project
Source: Fieldwork

5. Conclusion

Some work has been done on poverty reduction and issues raised, including the fact that projects meant to reduce poverty and transform the lives of the poor, especially in sub-Saharan Africa, have not always yielded the desired results. This article has used empirical data to buttress the above point and actually highlight the differences in the conceptualization of poverty as a major reason for the failure of poverty reduction projects. Among the shortcomings that the study identified, the fact that the participatory approach used by SOWEDA during needs assessment was not all inclusive. It did not allow for the inclusion of the voices, experiences, needs and opinions of the most vulnerable, which include to a greater extent women and children. Likewise the way poverty was conceived in the project was limited. There was a discrepancy between respondents' notion of poverty and poverty as addressed by the LFDP. While the project conceived poverty as low productivity in livestock and fishery activities, lack of skills and low income, respondents conceived poverty not only as low income and lack of skills, but also as lack of access to basic services like health, education, decent shelter, lack of a 'voice' and a feeling of vulnerability. This somehow limited the capacity of the project and limited its impact on the livelihood of the respondents. This also explains why 60% of respondents were still poor five years after the project; and the project

was not a good success of a poverty alleviation project.. For most respondents, their situation had returned to what it was before the project.

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