Perceptions of Poverty among the Marginalised: A Case of Members of Community Based Groups in Kaabong and Kotido Districts, Uganda

Victoria A. Namukwaya

Bugema University, Graduate School, Department of Development Studies, Kampala, Uganda

Israel Kibirige

University of Limpopo, Polokwane, South Africa
Israel.Kibirige@ul.ac.za

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Abstract

The study was carried out to explore perceptions of poverty among members of Community Based Groups (CBGs) in Kaabong and Kotido districts in Uganda. Random sampling was used to select four CBGs and the study participants were selected using opportunistic sampling. The study adopted a qualitative approach and employed face to face interviews for data collection. Data was analysed using narrative analysis. The study established that while outsiders perceive the people of Karamoja to be victims of chronic poverty, the study participants did not perceive themselves to be poor and their definitions of who is poor greatly differed from popular definitions. The study, therefore, recommends that community development strategies should endeavour to understand the perceptions of the people affected by a particular problem to be addressed. Understanding these perceptions is critical in designing interventions and policies to address the problem. Effective policy instruments designed to address poverty, for instance, should include the broad social and political dimensions, as well as the aspirations of people living in poverty; and these depend on the poor people's perceptions of poverty.

Keywords: perceptions, poverty, marginalised, social exclusion, the poor

1. Introduction

Addressing poverty is one of the challenges of the twenty-first century and there is increasing concern that many development interventions have not yielded sustainable development outcomes. While poverty is believed to be rampant in various countries, its definitions and perceptions differ from society to society. How poverty is perceived and defined by policy makers and development actors is critical to designing relevant poverty alleviation policies and interventions. On the other hand, the poor people's perceptions of poverty are the basis for aspirations and intrinsic motivation towards positive change, which is the purpose of development interventions. It is thus important to establish the poor people's views of the problem, since these will influence their attitude and level of participation in the respective poverty alleviation interventions.

2. The Setting

Located in North-eastern Uganda, Kotido and Kaabong districts are part of Karamoja region. The people of Karamoja are predominantly nomadic pastoralists who have lived as a marginalised group due to their unique and challenging lifestyles (Owiny, 2006). The region registers some of the least development indicators in Uganda; with lowest literacy rates, high disease burden and infant mortality as well as poor infrastructure (UNOCHA, 2009). It is estimated that eighty two percent of the people in Karamoja are living in poverty (UNOCHA, 2009). Due to the appalling living standards in the region, there are numerous development agencies carrying out humanitarian and development work in Karamoja in a bid to improve the people's quality of life. The most recent development trend employed by many of the agencies is encouraging the poor people to work in Community Based Groups (CBGs).

3. Statement of the Research Problem

While poverty alleviation is at the heart of the global agenda, studies indicate that poverty alleviation programmes have

not wrought significant improvement (Gathiram, 2005; Cheru, 2006), and poverty remains pervasive particularly in Sub-Saharan Africa (Barret et al. 2006). The majority of studies on poverty have taken a quantitative approach and many poverty alleviation programmes have been based on experts' perceptions of poverty. These studies have often missed the multifaceted nature of poverty and overlooked the effects of long time deprivation and social exclusion on the affected people's perceptions of poverty. Chambers *et al* (1990) argue that failure to define poverty to include economic, social and political conditions of deprivation has serious implications for policy. Since poor people must be active players in the war against poverty, understanding their perceptions of poverty is critical. Listening to the poor themselves is essential in understanding the multifaceted nature of poverty (Davids *et al.*, 2005), and thus form a basis for designing effective policy instruments to address poverty.

4. Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study was to explore perceptions of poverty among members of CBGs in Kaabong and Kotido districts. Understanding the people's perceptions of poverty is critical to designing appropriate poverty alleviation interventions and approaches. Thus, the study attempted to answer the following questions: 1) What are the CBG members' perceptions of poverty? 2) What are the CBG members' definitions of a poor person? 3) What are the CBG members' sources of livelihoods?

5. Theoretical Framework

The study was guided by a Constructivist paradigm, the Empowerment Theory (Sen, 1999) and the African World View (Dixon, 1996). Constructivists believe that knowing is not done by an outside spectator but is constructed by a participant, with society providing a reference point or theory for making sense of the experience (Oxford, 1997). On the other hand, the Empowerment theory asserts that poverty is more than lack of income but is lack of political and psychological power. The theory explains that poverty is the result of depriving citizens of power and control (Sen, 1999). In addition, the study was also inclined to the African world view which is believed to be a universal orientation and interpretive reference that is characteristic of African people (Azibo, 1992, Dixon, 1996). Jones (1992) argues that all people have a worldview that is shaped by their lived experiences; which help them to make sense of their surroundings and ultimately determine their actions. One of the interpretive notions that are relevant to this study is the African epistemological orientation of 'affective-oriented imagery cognition' whereby knowledge is constructed by personalising phenomenon (Dixon, 1996). This signifies that research among Africans should consider African axiology, epistemology and logic which are central to the African world view.

6. Review of Related Literature

Whereas alleviating poverty and inequality has been part of the global agenda for many years, poverty remains a blatant reality even in the twenty-first century. Global statistics indicate that 1.7 billion people in 109 countries live in multidimensional poverty (Human Development Report, 2010). These statistics show the ubiquitous nature of the poverty problem despite the variations in the definitions of 'who is poor' and the varying 'causes of poverty'. Poverty has been classified as absolute or relative (Rowntree, 2000) where 'absolute poverty' is defined as the inability to afford the basic survival necessities of life such as food and shelter, and 'relative poverty' as a socially constructed measure relating to a level of quality of life (Townsend, 1979, Bradshaw, 2005). Irrespective of the category, there is growing consensus that poverty is a multifarious system that is created by a variety of factors: geographical, historical, cultural and political factors, among others. Narrow definitions of poverty have serious challenges particularly in designing poverty reduction policies and interventions. Chambers *et al* (1990) argue that failure to distinguish between poverty defined to cover a range of economic, social and political conditions of deprivation, and what professionals actually measure in their assessments of poverty has serious implications for policy makers. For example the poor have sometimes been blamed for their plight as it was argued that people become poor because they either lack the genetic qualities to improve their situations or they do not work hard enough. Attributing poverty to individual factors has had its misgivings and it may sound like an insensitive allegation by those who have not suffered at the grips of poverty. Lewis (1959) sensitively argues that in order to understand the culture of the poor, it is necessary to live with the poor and identify with their problems and aspirations. Other studies indicate that social position, ethnicity, being an indigenous people; nomadism and pastoralism are also factors that predispose people to chronic poverty (Mehta & Shah, 2003; Sen, 2003).

Poverty can also be defined in terms of social exclusion (Hills & Stewart, 2005). Social exclusion has been equated

to disempowerment at the individual level and as structural obstacles at the social level, which deny some groups access to resources associated with citizenship (Sen, Du Toit, 2004). Furthermore, Pollett (2011) defines poverty as lack of opportunities, lack of meaningful employment, lack of a sense of belonging, and lack of a sense of citizenship. On this basis, Sen (1999) argues that in order to address poverty, society must provide all of its citizens with: political, economic, and social freedom; security and protection; and transparent governmental activities. A person who is unable to participate in the basic economic and social activities of the society where s/he lives can be considered to be socially excluded (Chakravarty & D'Ambrosio, 2006). Powell (2010) alludes that the people of Karamoja have suffered from chronic poverty which is inter-generational. Chronic poverty is characterised by its polygonal nature and duration. Long-time marginalisation and the harsh living conditions may have influenced the values, livelihood choices and aspirations of the Karimojong people (Namukwaya & Kibirige, 2014), thus plunging the people in an impoverished situation. People living in different contexts may have different perceptions of the same thing. Diamond (2007) argues that cognition, perception and emotions are influenced by cultural context and background. Moreover, Davids et al., (2005) argue that poor people have their own understanding and interpretation of social reality, which is often different from the outsiders' perspectives, whose knowledge of poverty often comes from books and media. Poor people define their situations and set their ambitions basing on their lived experiences. For instance, Wright et al., 1990 study indicates that marginalised people sometimes adopt an attitude of defeat when they realise they cannot do much about their plight.

While many studies cluster the poor in one broad category, Hulme and Shepherd (2003) contend that understanding the nature and degree of multidimensionality of poverty is critical. In order to design effective poverty alleviation strategies, the unique contexts of poverty should be identified since poor people are not a homogeneous group. Poverty situations vary from place to place. Carr (2008) challenges the singular conceptualisation of poverty as a universal problem and argues that effective poverty eradication strategies should encompass the various complex barriers to human well-being that emerge in particular places. Chambers (1983) cautions that when rural development professionals undervalue the knowledge and experience of people living in poverty, it leads to a faulty understanding of the issue, which in course influences the strategies designed to address the problem. Still, Harper (2003) argues that since people are conscious purposeful beings, social scientific research must extend beyond macro-level explanations to de-mystify explanations of poverty and its ideological foundations in a social context. Understanding the poor people's perceptions of poverty is critical to designing effective development initiatives. It is necessary to understand how people living in particular places perceive of poverty (Carr, 2008).

7. Data Collection and Analysis

The study employed a phenomenological design because it investigated participants' perceptions of poverty as a concept. A total of 16 (8F, 8M) respondents from 4 Adventist Development and Relief Agency (ADRA) supported (CBGs) participated in the study. Two groups from each Kaabong and Kotido districts participated in the study. Purposeful sampling was used to select the CBGs that participated in the study as the researchers looked for CBGs that had visions of improving members' livelihoods. The purposeful sampling targeted active ADRA supported CBGs that had been in existence for a minimum of three years. CBG activity was determined by a group being able to hold regular meetings and evidence of implementing group activities by the time of the study. The activity that was common to the four CBGs selected was engagement in Village Saving and Loaning Associations (VSLA). Opportunistic sampling was used to select the study participants. Data was collected using an interview guide which had been checked by two development workers for face validity. The interviews lasted for 30 minutes each. The interviews were conducted in Ngakarimojong dialect and the participants' responses were translated to English during the sessions. Prompts were used as an aid to 'Question one' so that the respondents definitions could be verified basing on personal experience. Two native interpreters were employed to translate the interview guiding questions as well as the participants' responses. To ensure accuracy of the recordings, the written statements were translated back into Ngakarimojong and read back to the participants as a 'member check' for participants to consent to the meaning recorded (Shenton 2004). The study participants' responses were transcribed using verbatim transcriptions and qualitative narrative analysis was used to analyse data (Bamberg, 2003).

8. Results

The results from the face to face interviews are presented in this section. Data from the 16 interviews was analysed using narrative analysis and the results are presented below according to the respective questions.

8.1 Poverty Definitions

Out of the 16 participants, none was able to give a precise definition of poverty but they all could describe characteristics of one they would consider to be poor. The definitions and frequencies from the respondents' narratives are summarised in Table 1.

Table 1: Poverty Definitions

Definition	M	F	Frequency
One who does not own cattle	8	6	14
One who owns nothing	8	8	16
One who has no house	2	8	10
One who cannot provide milk to his children	4	7	11
A woman who has no husband	0	4	4
One who cannot buy what he wants	5	2	7

Two of the most popular definitions of a poor person were 'one who owns nothing' which had 16 (100%) responses and 'one who does not own cattle' which had 14 (87.5%) responses. Unique to the women respondents was defining a poor person as 'a woman who has no husband'. This definition had a frequency of four out of the eight females who participated in the study. Listed below are sample excerpts on the various themes:

8.1.1 A poor person is one who does not own cattle

One male respondent in Kotido district explains: "A man who owns no cattle is very poor. No one can respect you here when you own no animals. If one has cattle he can get anything else he may need. Cattle mean life. With cattle one has food. A man who is so poor that he owns no cattle cannot even get married because no parent would give his daughter to such a poor man. Therefore if you have no cattle it would mean that you will have no milk, food and you cannot marry."

8.1.2 A poor person is one who owns nothing

While this was a common expression by all respondents, sentiments from a female respondent in Kaabong district: "A poor person owns nothing and it is not possible to own nothing. Every living person owns something."

8.1.3 A poor person is one who has no house

One female respondent expresses "A poor person is one who has nowhere to stay; someone without a house. If you have a house then you are not poor."

8.1.4 A poor person cannot provide milk to his children

Another female respondent commented that "A person who cannot find milk to feed his children is poor." Thus, "A poor person is one who cannot provide milk to his children"

8.1.5 A poor person is a woman who has no husband

One female respondent from Kaabong district explains "It is only women who have no husbands who are poor. A man must pay a number of cows to the parents of the girl he wants to marry. That means that the woman herself has value and if the man can pay then he is not poor. So the woman who gets married has value herself and joins a man who owns something."

8.1.6 A poor person is one who cannot buy what he wants

A number of people expressed that a person who wants something but cannot afford to buy it is poor.

When the study participants were asked whether they considered themselves to be poor, none of them admitted that he/she considered him/herself to be poor. For the purpose of verification of the definitions given, the study participants were asked whether they knew any poor people. In Kaabong district only one out of the 8 participants admitted that he knew two poor people in the entire district. When asked why he thought the two people were poor, it was explained that the two people were homeless and they sometimes slept outside on shop verandas. The researchers later discovered that the two people referred to as poor were actually mentally sick.

8.2 Sources of Livelihoods

The participants' responses on their sources of livelihoods are indicated in Table 2.

Table 2: Sources of Livelihoods

Livelihood	M	F	Total
Cutting trees/selling fire wood/burning charcoal	3	5	7
Brewing 'ebutia'/'ekwete'	0	5	5
Seasonal cultivation	8	8	16
Selling livestock	4	2	6

Using first-person experiences, participants indicated their sources of livelihoods which included: seasonal cultivation (16) cutting trees/selling fire wood/burning charcoal (7), brewing 'ebutia' or 'ekwete' (5) and selling livestock (6). Detailed below are sample narratives on the various livelihood themes:

8.2.1 Cutting trees/selling fire wood/burning charcoal

One female respondent narrates: "I get money by burning charcoal. Because cutting trees and burning charcoal is a hard job, we work in groups. We are four women friends in my group and we cut trees and burn charcoal. When the charcoal is ready we divide it equally amongst ourselves and it is up to each member to find a market for her lot. Personally, I prefer to sell the charcoal in town where I can get a good price. However, sometimes it is hard to get a buyer and we are forced to sell cheaply in order to avoid the pain of carrying the charcoal back to the village."

On the same theme, one male respondent from Kotido district explains: "To tell you the truth I do not have anything I do to earn a living. I have tried many things but they all did not work. I tried to cut trees and sell firewood but I got frustrated. Looking for trees to cut is not easy. One time I cut the firewood and carried the bundle on my head looking for buyers. The first buyer I found was willing to pay me one thousand shillings only (less than half US dollar), which I thought was very little. I moved on hoping to find a better buyer. After I had walked for about 30km the next buyer I found was willing to pay no more than five hundred shillings for my firewood; which was even less than the first offer I received. By this time I was so hungry and tired as I had not eaten for two days. I walked on until I felt like I was about to faint. I was so frustrated that I branched to a nearby bush and dropped down the firewood. I left it for whoever would find it and I vowed never to deal in firewood again as the work takes a lot of energy and you cannot be sure you will get a good price."

8.2.2 Brewing 'ebutia'/'ekwete'

One female respondent from Kotido district narrates: "One of the most profitable means of making money in this area is brewing 'ebutia'. This drink is liked by both men and women. I make two big buckets per day and they consume it all. It is the men that buy big quantities; they take 'ebutia' when they are hungry and when they are thirsty. They cannot do without it.... I did not have the money to start this business until I borrowed money from our VSLA group which I invested and from the profits I am able increase my savings with the group."

Again, another female respondent from Kaabong district explains: "I have tried many things to get money to take care of my family but most of the things were not successful. For about three months now, I started brewing 'ekwete' and I am happy with the business because I have many customers. I make sure that I reach my selling place early every morning so that my regular buyers do not go to other vendors. The good thing with this business is that there are buyers every time of the day. One of the biggest challenges with the business is the ever rising prices of maize which is one of basic raw materials for brewing." The brew was different in the two districts.

8.2.3 Seasonal cultivation

An account by a female respondent from Kaabong district: "I do not have many things that I can do to get money but during the rainy seasons I grow some crops. We grow crops in our group garden and I grow crops in my family garden. Sometimes the crops do well but some bad years we lose everything when the rain is not enough. During one good season we were able to harvest 10 bags of groundnuts (peanuts) from our group garden. However, during bad years we lost everything."

8.2.4 Selling livestock

A male respondent from Kaabong district states: "I earn money from selling livestock. The best place to sell animals is the weekly livestock market where there are many buyers and one can get a good price. I do not own cattle at the moment after losing everything to raiders. I became very poor when all my animals were raided; but when I joined the VSLA group I borrowed some money and went to the livestock market in Kotido district where I bought four goats. When I brought the goats to Kaabong and I sold them and I made a good profit. I was able to pay back the loan at once and was able to keep some money in my pocket. From that time, I do this business once a month."

Another respondent from Kotido district narrates: "I make sure I can sell something in the market every Wednesday. Once in a while I sell from my own stock of animals but most often I buy goats from the villages and take them to the weekly market. Recently, I found that the goats were cheap and I bought two goats which I kept at home for two weeks and took them back to the market and made a profit."

9. Discussion

The study established that none of the study participants was able to define poverty as an abstract concept although they were able to describe who is poor. This finding may not be unique to the people of Karamoja since poverty is a relatively ambiguous term. The study participants' ability to define 'who is poor' as opposed to 'what is poverty' could partly be attributed to the African epistemological orientation of 'affective-oriented imagery cognition' whereby knowledge is constructed by personalising phenomenon (Dixon, 1996). From the definitions of a poor person given, it is evident that the participants defined poverty in terms of basic survival needs even though sometimes basic survival goods are defined as resources for well-being (Morris, 2002). Most of the definitions given were non-income. The definition with the highest frequency was that 'a poor person' is one that owned nothing. From the respondents' perspective and the failure to consider themselves as poor, they believed that they all owned something. Their position could be based on the fact that traditionally, almost every Karimojong household owns some livestock (cattle, goats or sheep). However, this definition did not have a value aspect; even though the majority of them were barely dressed, lived in grass thatched houses and had very little or nothing of material wealth. This finding may be attributed to the subjective nature of poverty.

The next popular definition was that a poor person was one that owns no cattle. This is understandable considering that the people of Kaabong and Kotido districts are part of the Karamoja pastoral community where owning cattle is at the core of Karimojong identity and survival. This response was closely related to the definition of a poor person as one who cannot provide milk to his/her children. It is worthy to note that only 7 out of the 16 definitions (Table 1) had a financial implication where poverty was defined as the 'inability to buy...' One of the definitions of poverty that was given by female participants was that 'a woman who has no husband' is poor. This definition could have been as a result of the patriarchal society where a woman's worth is only defined in terms of her husband. This may partly explain the polygamous nature of many families in Karamoja whereby a man may have many wives, and it is prestigious for a woman to be married even if she is to be the tenth wife.

It is worth to note that the definitions of poverty given by the members of the CBGs are not the conventional definitions. The study participants defined poverty from their terms of reference (Table 1) and this corroborates the argument by Davids *et al.*, (2005) that poor people's understanding and interpretation of social reality, often varies from outsiders' perspectives. The definitions of poverty given were not abstract terms but were lived experiences. This is in agreement with the African world view of affective-oriented imagery cognition (Dixon, 1996). In addition, the finding corroborates Sen's view that poverty is more than lack of income but it is lack of political and psychological power (Sen, 1999). It is possible that long-time social exclusion has limited the people's psychological power and imagination of what constitutes good quality life. The simplistic definitions of poverty could be attributed to the level of marginalisation and an attitude of defeat whereby the people of Karamoja do not see any hope for living a better quality of life (Wright *et al.*, 1990) relative to a life of deprivation that has characterised their existence for generations.

Whereas the study participants would be judged to be very poor at face value basing on they appearance, none of the 16 participants admitted to be poor. The people's cognition, perceptions and emotions may have been influenced by historical and cultural contexts (Diamond, 2007). Furthermore, Randall (1995) argues that the stories we tell are such because they reflect the stories we are. The people of Karamoja have not known anything better in terms of living conditions and their perceptions of poverty have been shaped by their context of deprivation, social exclusion and lack of exposure. They have come to accept their deprived state as the norm and thus may not aspire for anything better. Failure to understand these perceptions of poverty is detrimental to development work. Since many poverty stricken people are those who have had limited opportunities for human capital development through formal schooling, development practitioners should employ constructivist approaches (Oxford, 1997). These constructivists' approaches would help the poor people to analyse their situations in order to develop new perceptions and aspirations which would form a basis for intrinsic motivations for change. This finding implies that there could be variations in how different groups of people perceive an issue and therefore rural development strategies should aim at understanding the poor people's perceptions of the issue in order to support them in developing new visions and aspirations for improvement.

While none of the study participants considered themselves to be among the poor lot, their sources of livelihoods indicate that the majority of them did not have reliable livelihoods (Table 2). The narratives on the kind of activities that they carried out to eke out a living indicate a life of limited opportunities. This again corroborates with the 'affective-oriented imagery cognition' whereby knowledge is constructed by personalising phenomenon (Dixon, 1996). In this case the phenomenon of their livelihoods did not register any sense of poverty. While all participants indicated that they participated in seasonal cultivation, Karamoja climatic conditions render this option quite unreliable since the region seldom receives enough rain for a successful cropping season. The next most popular source of livelihood was cutting trees/selling fire wood/burning charcoal, and this option benefited more women than men. This source of livelihood is not only cumbersome, but it is also destructive to the environment considering the semi-arid nature of the region. The most reliable source of livelihood pointed out was brewing 'ebutia'/'ekwete' (local brews) and this was an option exclusively for women. Brewing and selling alcohol was reported to be the easiest way to generate income since taking alcohol is a popular practice in the region (Table 2). Selling livestock was pointed out as a livelihood option particularly for men. This is due to gender differences in access and control of economic resources. The various narratives on definitions and sources of livelihoods highlight the quality of life of the people of Karamoja which reflect real life experiences that have shaped the people's values, views and perceptions. The definitions of poverty and the respective accounts of sources of livelihoods tell a story of the respondents' impoverished state since the various sources do not constitute meaningful employment (Pollett, 2011). This could also be due to an attitude of defeat (Wright *et al.*, 1990) whereby the people have no big aspirations. This calls for concerted efforts to empower the people and to create opportunities for expanding their livelihood options.

10. Conclusion

The study has found that while many people are classified as poor by international and national standards, some of the 'poor people' do not know that they are poor! The authors contend that long-time marginalisation and social exclusion may lead to an attitude of defeat whereby the poor people accept their deprived situation as the norm. This may have been the case with the people of Karamoja who even in the twenty-first century have not known basic well-being, and have very little hope for improving their livelihoods as was revealed in their definitions of 'who is poor'. The poor people's perceptions of poverty are critical to developing goals for change and thus successful development interventions.

Due to limitations in scope and sample size, the study findings may not be generalised to people in other parts of Uganda and other countries. Nevertheless, the finding that social exclusion may impact on perceptions of different concepts is critical in assisting marginalised people to develop aspirations for change. The finding may also influence rural development strategies to include more capacity building interventions that help in the construction of new knowledge to identify and analyse the problems that affect the people as well as setting goals for change in addressing the identified problems. Due to the multidimensional nature of poverty there is need for more context specific studies in order to understand the micro-level dynamics of poverty especially in Africa.

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