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Can CBPMS Become a National System?

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Poverty alleviation activities need to be undertaken with a clear understanding of characteristics of the poor, causes of their poverty, and where they are located. It’s needs also to know the progress of poverty-oriented policies, programmes, and projects in terms of their impacts, effectiveness, and efficiency. The poverty monitoring systems are aimed to satisfy these demands. They collect, analyse, and disseminate poverty-related data to policy makers, researchers and communities.

1. Popular poverty monitoring systems:
There are two types of data which may be used for poverty monitoring: monetary and non-monetary.
The monetary data generally come from household budget surveys, household income and expenditure surveys or living standards measurement surveys. The most common is the household living standard measurement survey (LSMS). It’s based on incomes and consumption levels.
LSMS provides crucial general information to assess the situation of the people in the whole country as well as in each region. They also provided valuable data to estimate the poverty level of inhabitants in urban and rural areas. Many scientific studies using this data, have provided useful recommendations for policy-makers. However, this kind of survey has some disadvantages:

- The information from the survey mainly serves the work of the central government agencies and researchers because the LSMS indicators reflect the general situation of the whole country and large areas (urban - rural sectors, large regions). The survey sample does not represent provinces and social groups by occupation and ethnicity.

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These surveys are expensive and are generally carried out once every five years. Income, consumption and expenditure are affected by season, climate and many other non-expected factors and these call for adjustment unless the survey covered the entire year.

- The participation of local people in collecting and analyzing information is very limited. They have no chance to make use of these data because the analyzing technique is too complicated and the result of nationally sampled survey is too general for them to use in daily local management.

- The cost of surveys is high, so that they cannot be implemented regularly.

- The result of data processing is released after a long period of time (1-2 years).

- As sampled surveys, these LSMS cannot supply the exact address and name list of poor households in each area as well as the locally particular information about poverty. As a result, they do not meet the information requirement of planning, implementation and monitoring of poverty alleviation at each local area.

While much progress has been made in measuring and analyzing poverty in monetary indicators, efforts are needed to measure and study the many other non-monetary dimensions of poverty. Although LSMS collect and present indicators, which reflect consumption of such social services as education, health care, it’s still needed to assemble comparable and high-quality social indicators for education, health, access to services and infrastructure, social equity, etc. It also includes developing new indicators to track other dimensions, for example risk, vulnerability, social exclusion, access to social capital, as well as ways to compare a multi-dimensional conception of poverty, when it may not make sense to aggregate the various dimensions into one index.

In order to complement to the monetary data surveys, participatory methods are more commonly used for poverty assessment. In participatory poverty assessment (PPA), people are interviewed on their basic needs, their individual opinions and assessment on the life situation, poverty problems and their requirements for polices. Participatory survey methods illustrate the nature of risk and vulnerability, how cultural factors and ethnicity interact and affect poverty, how social exclusion sets limits to people’s participation in development, and how barriers to such participation can be removed.

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2. Community-based poverty monitoring systems:

The community-based poverty monitoring system (CBPMS) addresses the need of up-to-date data of living status in localities by frequently collecting data. There are some characteristics, which make CBPMS different in comparison with a “standard” LSMS:

- CBPMS involves the participation of the communities in the collection and primary use of data, while the whole process of data collection, processing and use in LSMS conducted by high-qualified experts. The communities have good understanding of the living conditions of poor households. They can be directly involved in analyzing the poverty causes of each household, and guarantee the transparency and the democracy in implementing policies and using resources provided for support to the poor. The local people participate in discussion on poverty reduction activities in their commune and village, therefore they can enhance their position in deciding community's affairs. On the other hand, by taking part in poverty monitoring the local people can easily monitor the implementation of supporting policies and ensure that the government's support can go to the right addresses effectively.

- CBPMS uses relatively simple indicators, which the local communities easily understand and use. Complicated indicators might be computed and aggregated, but in a later phase with involvement of “external” assistance.

- CBPMS can be conducted at different local scopes - from villages to provinces - depending on decentralization of management of poverty reduction. Local communities can decide to conduct CBPMS frequently in dependency of they data needs.

- CBPMS can combine quantitative and qualitative methods of data collection at one time than limited scope and not too complicated structure of surveyed community, while LSMS used to be solely quantitative survey and needed to be complemented by another qualitative surveys (PPA).

- Based on community participation, CBPMS is a low-cost and easy-to-sustain system. The expense for this system is not big, because it uses local human resources and integrates the poverty monitoring activity into responsibilities of local authorities and social organisations.

With CBPMS, poverty monitoring process can become decentralised, locally appropriate and flexible to meet local demands.

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3. Worries about CBPMS:

Despite of above-mentioned advantages of CBPMS, one can express some worries about quality and capability aspects of this type of poverty monitoring. There are some questions:

- **Does the set of simple indicators satisfy the needs of policy-making process?**
  The set of CBMSP usually includes relative simple indicators of basic needs. It reflect such aspects of living standard and poverty as food security, housing, education, health, security, etc. Monetary indicators like income and expenditures used not to included in this set, because of their difficult collection and complicated calculation. Without these indicators, one can not define poverty rate, which based on monetary poverty line, and can not compute many other analytical indicators of poverty and social inequality.

- **Does the participatory data collection meet the quality requirements? Can local communities properly process and analyze the collected data?**
  People in local communities, especially in poor region and of ethnic minorities, have low level of education and few experiences in data collection, processing and analysis. Despite of simplicity of data and indicators, errors in survey process might lead to misunderstanding of poverty status.

- **Can results of CBPMS in different localities be linked and integrated in a national database? Or can CBPMS extent scope and become a national system?**
  CBPMS may be implemented successful in separated localities. It supplies a set of indicators and qualitative information on poverty in local context. The problem is how to compare and link between the localities and how to use the local data to set up a database of higher levels (e.g. district, provincial and national), if the indicators might be not comparable in term of their content and time.
4. Implementation of CBPMS in Vietnam

The past pilot implementation of CBPMS by MIMAP-Vietnam in some communes has shown that the collection of basic information about socio-economic situations in general and the poverty situation in particular is very helpful to the work of local officers and non-governmental organisations. Data is systematized at village and commune levels, and can be used immediately by local people in development planning and poverty monitoring for years. During piloting CBPMS in Vietnam, the above mentioned worries about CBPMS were raised for discussion and to find solutions. The following solutions have been implemented in order to improve the quality of data collection, to create the possibility of CBPMS use in poverty monitoring at different administrative levels with ambitious aims to institutionalize CBPMS as a national poverty monitoring system.

(1) Types of survey:

Sample survey cannot identify the address of the poor. In order to meet the requirement of the localities for identification of poor households, CBPMS in Vietnam has two stages in which implemented two types of survey:

- In the first year, a census is to be conducted with aim to present a broad socio-economic picture of the community and identify who are poor. The poor households are identified by the communities through the results of the survey and participatory assessment of the living standards. Beside the poverty lines (national and local), the communities use also other criteria of basic needs and households property in identification of the poor households. A list of the poor households will be reported to the higher administrative levels and kept at the communities. The households of the “poor status” will receive support from government poverty reduction programmes and community assistance.

- In the next some years, sample survey is to be conducted to monitor the annual changes. The list of poor households has to be scanned and readjusted.

Qualitative and quantitative methods are combined in survey. To be more specific, together with the structured interview, which use questionnaire, there are group discussion, interview of key informants in communities, through which explored the information on causes of poverty, requirements of communities and the poor toward governmental poverty alleviation policies and measures.

(2) Set of indicators:

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• During designing questionnaires, two sets of indicators have been defined: (i) core indicators, which are used nationally; and (ii) local indicators, which are suitable to local context and used for presenting the specific aspects of localities. While the set of core indicators is the same for all localities, the set of local indicators and the qualitative information are designed with attention to local contexts and concrete information demands of local use. For example, cultivation land per capita is a national indicator; but for mountainous areas it’s needed to add the indicators of forestry land and barren land; while for plain areas, indicator of paddy land is important to assess the economic situation of households.

• Poverty is a multi-dimensional phenomenon. Therefore, in the experimental CBPMS in Vietnam, poverty is comprehensively reflected through a set of indicators which show firstly basic needs of households (for example food security of households, clothing, accommodation, transportation, access to education and health services, women’s position in social activities of community). In Vietnam, the Government uses per capita income as key measurement of poverty. Poverty rate of localities and system of public support for the poor households are based on this measurement. In order to cope with this, beside indicators reflecting basic needs, the CBPMS has also to be designed to collect information needed for income calculation. As a result, CBPMS supplies both basic needs and income indicators. Although this makes survey be more complicated, CBPMS becomes more useful for both local and national monitoring purposes.

• The design of survey tools has to count not only knowledge levels of local people, but also the availability of data processing equipment and software at localities. This is the big difference compared to the national surveys, in which the surveyors and the data processing staff are skilled experts and are well equipped in term of modern technology. They also have enough long time for deep analysis of collected data.
(3) Data gathering:
Local people conduct the surveys themselves in the capacity of surveyors. In order to improve quality of data collection, intervention of the "external people" (government officers and researchers) is needed in the first stages, namely for survey training, guiding and supervising.

(4) Data processing and analysis:
There are still two stages of data processing. Firstly, localities process the collected data by manual way and get some simple indicators, like poverty rate, types of housing, percentage of households getting support from poverty alleviation programmes and policies, etc. These information are used instantly for serving the local development planning and poverty reduction. Further, a deeper data processing and analysis is conducted by the “external people” (national experts and researchers) with aims to get more complicated indicators and information.

The collected data are computerized at provincial level, and in next years will be computerized at district level. It’s planned to prepare and supply localities a simple ready software for data processing.

(5) Institutionalizing and building a national CBPMS:
A strategy of CBPMS institutionalization is initiated with a “top-down approach”. Departing from the need of the National Programme for Hunger Eradication, Poverty Reduction, and Job Creation (HEPR) to have necessary data for monitoring poverty and impacts of HEPR in a nationwide scope, a national poverty observatory system (POS) was established. This system consists of some dozens of communes-observatories, which locate in the whole country. CBPMS is piloted in this POS. Since 2002, CBPMS has been piloted in 20 communes.

Under guide of the HEPR, the provincial POS has been piloted in some provinces and CBPMS was included in it. Since 2003, POS and CBPMS began to be implemented in Hatay province (with 30 communes-observatories) and Yenbai province (with 10 communes-observatories).

Different questionnaires have been developed in these two provinces, but beside the local indicators, they contain the same core set of indicators, which will be linked to national system of indicators.

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In coming years, efforts will be taken to encourage other provinces to establish their POS and implement CBPMS. Results of annual poverty monitoring at provincial level will be reported to the HEPR. The national poverty monitoring will be totally established, when every provinces have their POS. All provincial poverty observatories will play two roles: (i) supplying data for national poverty monitoring system; and (ii) supplying information for provincial needs.

The process of institutionalization of CBPMS will be long and it depends on success of CBPMS implementation in provinces.