

Enlisting Communities in the Fight Against Poverty

Gathering and analyzing information yields results in the Philippines

Effectively reducing poverty requires timely, accurate information. But while poverty alleviation has been a major goal of the Philippine government since 1986, gathering the data to support poverty alleviation programs has been difficult. IDRC's Micro Impacts of Macroeconomic and Adjustment Policies (MIMAP) program has been helping to provide that information since 1990. As a recent evaluation noted, the research initiated by MIMAP was exactly what the country needed.

Tourist guides almost invariably refer to Palawan as the most “enchantingly rustic” of the Philippine provinces. For the province’s 750 000 people, however, “rustic” is a euphemism for “poor.” The poverty rate in Palawan is close to 50%. Many inhabitants do not have potable water, adequate sanitation facilities, or electricity. Many are illiterate and malnourished.

When provincial officials sat down to plan the 1999 budget, they were determined to change that reality. But the problems seemed insurmountable. Palawan, made up of close to 1 800 islands stretched over 650 kilometres, suffers from an inadequate infrastructure, an enormous obstacle to development. Education and health services desperately need huge injections of money. Also contributing to poverty is the rate of population growth – at 3.8%, it is the highest in the Philippines.

Effectively reducing poverty requires timely, accurate information. But while poverty alleviation has been a major goal of the Philippine government since 1986, gathering the data to support poverty alleviation programs has been difficult. In fact, data on poverty was irregular, infrequent, and unmatched from survey to survey so no comprehensive profile could be drawn at any time. Regular surveys provide data on macro variables, such as the rate of inflation, the exchange rate, and the balance of trade. Surveys that measure income, housing, and the rate of malnutrition, however, are not conducted yearly, reducing their relevance and impact.

“We would know the impact of policies and programs only after three or four years,” says Dr Ponciano Intal, Executive Director of the Angelo King Institute for Economic and Business Studies (AKI) at De La Salle University in Manila. A case in point is the effect of the 1997-98 East Asia financial crisis and El Niño phenomena. Economist Dr Celia Reyes points out that “We only had a 1997 national survey; the next survey would be done three years later in 2000, so we didn’t have enough information to signal to policymakers and others that there were adverse social impacts on the population.” Yet the impacts were considerable: the Philippines gross domestic product contracted by 0.5%, triggering a boom-bust cycle and loss of foreign investment. Years of gains in poverty reduction were wiped out.

A three-pronged program

Also lacking was a systematic and regular collection of information on the “human dimension.” “We had planning exercises, but we didn’t have a way of measuring the quality-of-life of households,” explains Josephine Escano, Chief of the Research and Evaluation Division of the Provincial Planning and Development Office in Palawan. “We needed to find a way to measure that over the long haul so we could plan more efficiently and effectively.”

What they found was a community-based poverty monitoring system (CBMS), designed by the MIMAP-Philippines team. MIMAP – IDRC’s Micro Impacts of Macroeconomic and Adjustment Policies program – had begun in 1990 in the Philippines to sustain efforts to measure and analyze poverty and to develop policy alternatives that minimize adverse impacts on the poor. (For more information: http://web.idrc.ca/en/ev-6649-201-1-DO_TOPIC.html)



“There are many possible strategies for addressing poverty,” says Dr Reyes, leader of MIMAP’s CBMS network. “I think one of the most important may be to put in place a poverty monitoring system. Why? Because it would provide information on the different dimensions of poverty. Good numbers from a poverty monitoring system also allow us to assess the impact of policies and programs, and can help us identify beneficiaries for targeted programs.”

Poverty monitoring is one of three main components of the MIMAP-Philippines project. The second component, economic modeling, consists of a series of economic models estimated using Philippine data, including macroeconomic models, household models, and a linking matrix that translates macroeconomic effects into household effects. These models have been used to analyze the impact of tax reforms, trade liberalization, foreign exchange liberalization and deregulation, among others.

The third component is policy advocacy and information dissemination. As Celia Reyes explains, “it is only by effectively communicating the project’s findings to the appropriate audiences that we can hope to influence policy-making.” Tools include publications such as a quarterly bulletin, research papers, and a Web site. Policy workshops and community dialogues bring together technical experts and practitioners from the academic and research community and from policy-making bodies. MIMAP-Philippines has also participated actively in technical working groups on poverty and welfare monitoring, as well as on policy impact assessment.

Linking research to policy

In 2002, IDRC undertook to assess the public policy influence of some of the research it had supported. Case studies included three MIMAP projects – in the Philippines, Bangladesh, and Senegal. The evaluation looked at three types of policy influence: expanding policy capacities, broadening policy horizons, and changing policy regimes.

According to the report prepared by Maria Pía Riggiozzi and Tracy Tuplin with files from Kirit Parikh, MIMAP could not have arrived in the Philippines at a more propitious time. Dr Mario Lamberte, President of the Philippines Institute for Development Studies (PIDS), says that the research initiated by the MIMAP project was exactly what the country needed in 1990. “The Philippines had experienced a number of economic crises,” he

says, “and the government was concerned about how to respond.”

The success of MIMAP’s modeling work was evident early on in the interest policymakers and government officials took in the results. Every forum brought more people to the table. Key, explains Dr Caesar Cororaton, Research Fellow at PIDS and MIMAP Assistant Project Director, was that everyone recognized the research to be neutral.

Broadening horizons, expanding capacity

Respondents interviewed in the course of the study pointed to two major contributions by MIMAP-Philippines that broadened policy horizons and expanded policy capacity.

First, analytical tools were developed to capture the consequences of various economic reforms and to provide policymakers with good information on their possible impact. “MIMAP-Philippines illustrates a case of improving knowledge and supporting recipients to develop policies and capabilities of policymakers,” note Riggiozzi and Tuplin. Simply put, the tools for collecting data and the information gathered have enabled local decision-makers to analyze the causes of poverty, track changes, and assess the welfare of the population. When MIMAP first started, there was little research to back up policies. As Lamberte bluntly commented, government analysts or policymakers would not bother with the micro impacts of macroeconomic policies because there was no way of checking on them – the analytical part was simply missing.

The Commission to Fight Poverty, created in 1993–94, has since adopted those tools. The MIMAP team has also helped government agencies implement the monitoring system. The evaluation notes, however, that Philippine policy-making bodies have not yet institutionalized the models.

Second, MIMAP developed and tested quantitative methods for policy analysis and simulation, including computable general equilibrium, macroeconometrics, income distribution, and household models. These affected the planning system, budgeting, and program design at local and national levels. The modeling work and development of the indicators have clarified important policy issues and contributed to national debates on them, says the report. New development knowledge was brought to the table, as well as new insights into the process of development.



“The MIMAP project has played a crucial role in the analysis and forecasting of impacts of macro-economic and adjustment policies in the Philippines,” say Riggiozzi and Tuplin. Not only were new ideas of poverty alleviation and new tools to monitor the consequences on the poor developed, but MIMAP’s analytical instruments increased the quality and reliability of diagnostic work.

Affecting policy regimes

MIMAP’s lynchpin, however, is the poverty monitoring system. First tested in two villages, the system is now being implemented throughout the Philippines, including province-wide in Palawan and, more recently, Bulacan. In April 2003, the Philippine Department of the Interior and Local Government directed all local government units – at the *barangay*, municipal, city, and provincial levels – to adopt the system’s 13 core indicators for measuring poverty. From its first home in the Philippines, CBMS has now spread, with IDRC support, to 12 countries.

Fundamentally modifying programs and policies is not an easy task. But, say the evaluators, the implementation of CBMS in Palawan, “is a shining success story.” Contributing factors include:

- ❑ The involvement of policymakers at provincial, municipal, and *barangay* levels, as well as the vice-Governor and Governor, which contributed to the effective use of research outputs in the policy process.
- ❑ MIMAP research and statistical activities fed a new way of approaching poverty-related problems in Palawan. At the core is the set of indicators that allows data collection and interpretation in an easy, focused way. “CBMS gives you information about where you are now, where you should be, and how you’re going to get there,” says the Honourable Joel Reyes, Governor of Palawan and a staunch CBMS supporter. “It provides reliable, relevant, and comprehensive data on welfare conditions and development status across the province.”
- ❑ The research results were transferred to local people who now have a sense of ownership of the CBMS.

This last factor is crucial. Community members participate in the collection, processing, and use of the data, and in validating the data after collection. This empowers communities by providing them

with information and a process through which they can actively participate in planning, explains Dr Reyes. *Barangay* residents thus develop a keen sense of their priorities and are better able to articulate their needs to city planning officers. Armed with hard information on their condition, they are able to play a direct role in allocating budgetary resources. And they can demand accountability and transparency on the part of government officials.

“The MIMAP project has changed the way of making policy in that research gave new understanding to define a manageable, relevant set of indicators, as well as it gave credibility to policy formulation. In this sense it made it possible to test ideas, to adjust policies, and to improve them along the process of implementation,” say Riggiozzi and Tuplin. Equally important, CBMS’ successful implantation in Palawan facilitates its replication to other Philippine provinces.

Keys to success

MIMAP’s success in influencing policy in the Philippines is not serendipity. Riggiozzi and Tuplin note that the project was conceived “to influence policymakers directly by generating problem-solving knowledge.”

Other factors also contributed. Important were the close relationships established by the research team with government bodies such as the Presidential Commission to Fight Poverty (now the National Anti-Poverty Commission), the Department of the Interior and Local Government, the Department of Social Welfare and Development, and the National Economic and Development Authority. In fact, senior government officials participated in the project’s advisory board from the outset. Since then, the National Anti-Poverty Commission has invited Dr Reyes to collaborate in proposing mechanisms to diagnose poverty before an inter-agency committee working on institutionalizing a local poverty monitoring system. This close collaboration with government agencies resulted in further networking exercises among governmental and nongovernmental actors at different levels.

The sense of ownership by local government units, such as in Palawan, and by communities themselves contributed strongly to MIMAP’s success. Says Celia Reyes: “It is important to work with local governments at the outset since they will ultimately bear the costs and benefits.”



This brief was prepared by Michelle Hibler based on a case study written by Maria Pía Riggiozzi and Tracy Tuplin, with files from Kirit Parikh.

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Building capacity by doing

Influence was further assured by building the capacity of both policymakers and researchers through workshops and by networking. For instance, training was provided for government officials in newsletter writing and preparation so that the results of the CBMS survey could be disseminated more widely. This, says the evaluation, helped broaden policy debate among the population.

Lamberte also recognized that the capacity of researchers themselves to understand and advise policy was increased. This affected the growing

maturity of the researchers, deepening their understanding of the issue and providing better and more credible policy advice, he says.

The next challenges for MIMAP are to scale up and ensure that national statistical agencies coordinate the generation of data. This would enable CBMS to go nation-wide, says Celia Reyes. Also needed is technical assistance to local government units and a central repository for the data. And as Carmelita Erieta, administrator of the National Statistical Office pointed out, all government units need to recognize that information gathering is not a cost – rather, it's an investment.



The MIMAP Network: Promoting Innovation and Understanding

The MIMAP approach is founded on the conviction that poverty reduction strategies and programs will succeed only if reliable and timely information about poverty indicators is provided; and the belief that such programs will not succeed without a comprehensive understanding of the impacts of macroeconomic policies on the poor.

MIMAP helps developing countries design policies and programs that meet economic stabilization and structural adjustment targets while alleviating poverty and reducing vulnerability through research, training, and dialogue. Created by IDRC in 1989, the MIMAP Network now connects developing-country researchers, policymakers, NGOs, and international experts in a dozen countries of Africa and Asia.

The International Development Research Centre (IDRC) is a Canadian public corporation, created to help developing countries find solutions to the social, economic, and natural resource problems they face. Support is directed to building an indigenous research capacity. Because influencing the policy process is an important aspect of IDRC's work, in 2001 the Evaluation Unit launched a strategic evaluation of more than 60 projects in some 20 countries to examine whether and how the research it supports influences public policy and decision-making. The evaluation design and studies can be found at: www.idrc.ca/evaluation/policy