

Robb, C.M. (2002). *Can the Poor Influence Policy? Participatory Poverty Assessments in the developing world*. (2nd edition). International Monetary Fund and the World Bank: Washington DC.

Reviewed by

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The book began with a foreword to the second edition, which was written by Horst Kohler, then managing director of the International Monetary Fund, and James D. Wolfenson, then president of the World Bank Group. The two describe this book as a masterpiece that documented and analyzed the development of a comprehensive methodology that showed how to consult directly with the poor and link the results to the policy dialogue. In their view, the significance of including the poor became clearer during the East Asian crisis. By directly consulting poor people, policymakers found that the poor have a clear idea of what they want and that they are able to analyze their poverty, suggest solutions, and prioritize solutions. The foreword concluded by noting that the book was essential to policymakers who wished to understand how to improve consultation with the poor.

Following the foreword was another foreword, but it was to the first edition, which was published in 1999. The foreword was written by Gloria Davis, the, then, director of the World Bank of Social Development, and Michael Walton, the, then, director of the Poverty Reduction and Chief Economist, and Human Development respectively. The two asserted that poverty studies have become of critical importance to the World Bank since the reaffirmation of poverty reduction as its core purpose. According to the foreword, since the wake of the World Development Report (WDR) 1990 on poverty, the bank has become one of the major agents and supporters of the study of poverty through both a series of country-specific poverty assessments and a wide range of other research. This foreword concluded that developing powerful and effective diagnoses of the causes of poverty and suggests appropriate treatments to reduce poverty requires giving a genuine voice to poor people.

The book was divided into the following four chapters: Status Report, Impact of the Participatory Poverty Assessment, Emerging Good Practice, and Linking participatory poverty assessments (PPAs) to poverty reduction strategies. The book ended with very impressive appendixes of poverty assessments in the developing world.

The first chapter, Status Report, asserted that PPAs are broadening our understanding of both poverty and the policy process. The chapter defined PPA as a new method that includes poor people in the analysis of poverty with the objective of influencing policy. The chapter noted that in the 1980s, the World Bank's poverty reduction objectives were often overshadowed by the focus on economic adjustment to achieve macro-economic stability and structural change for long-

term growth. The chapter was quick to report that a decade later, the World Bank and other development agencies began to act to mitigate the consequences of economic and structural adjustments for the poor. For instance, Social Dimensions of Adjustments Program, funded by several multilateral agencies, was launched in November 1987 in response to the concerns of the poor in Africa. In addition to that, the World Development Report 1990, which focused on the issue of poverty, proposed a strategy for achieving a more effective poverty reduction. The report was followed in 1991 by Policy Paper Assistance Strategies to Reduce Poverty, which laid out how the findings of the World Development Report could be used to strengthen poverty reduction efforts by countries. The policy paper recommended that a poverty assessment be conducted for each country, with the objective of analyzing the nature and causes of poverty and developing a strategy for poverty reduction.

The chapter also provided a detailed analysis of how other actors in poverty reduction, such as the European donors, supported the PPAs through a trust fund. It also highlighted how operational funding began to emphasize the social dimensions of poverty and funding for many of the World Bank's PPAs in Africa. The chapter aptly provided detail on how PPAs are conducted. In this regard, the status report concluded that the design of a PPA is determined by factors such as the conditions in a country, the research agenda, the size of the sample, the experience of the researchers, links to policymaking, and the extent to which capacity building for poverty analysis is included. Further detail was provided on the composition of research teams in PPA. For instance, in Eastern Europe, the research was conducted by individuals from local universities and in other countries. It is noted that NGOs also undertook PPA related field research (for example, Centre for Development of People in Ghana, CARE in Cameroon, African Medical and Research Foundation in Kenya, Red Cross in Lesotho, Save the Children in Mali). The chapter highlighted the main methodologies that are used in PPAs as the beneficiary assessments (BA), the participatory rural appraisals (PRA), and the rapid rural appraisals (RRA). The chapter also presented a detailed analysis of the three methodologies previously mentioned.

The second chapter of the book was on the impact of the PPAs on poverty reduction. The chapter reported that most PPAs have achieved the objective of poverty reduction, but with substantial variation in the level of impact. The chapter was also quick to note that although the principal objectives of PPAs have been to diagnose the causes and nature of poverty and to influence policy, some PPAs have been successful in fostering dialogue with and building the capacity of credible poverty reduction institutions, which then creates links between traditional and formal institutions. A great deal of effort is put to discuss the dimensions of poverty. The chapter concluded that policy dialogue has focused primarily on income and consumption measures of poverty, while other dimensions of poverty have been under emphasized in the policy debate.

The chapter reiterates the position that insights arising from the PPAs are contributing to the broader debates within the World Bank on how to measure and monitor poverty, integrate social dimensions into policy and project work, and increase the impact of the bank's operations by adopting participatory approaches. It was also emphasized that PPAs have successfully contributed to a shift of policy emphasis in several countries. For example, in Nigeria, the World Bank had been focusing on health and education, yet the PPA highlighted that the poor viewed water and roads as their priority. As a result, there is now greater focus on the water and road network. In Zambia, the World Bank's Social Fund supported some of the priorities identified by the communities in the PPAs and a health project now includes cost recovery conditions as identified in the PPA. The chapter is concluded with a detailed analysis of the determinants of the level of impact of PPAs.

The methodology of impact analysis is also highlighted in this chapter. In actuality, 43 PPAs were collected by the author of the book, however 21 (the ones with sufficient data) were analyzed in more detail to quantify the level of impact and take steps in exploring the effects of a variety of possible explanatory variables. The results of the analysis were summarized in a table. The analysis of the 21 PPAs suggested a significant influence on the diagnosis of poverty in 71 percent of the cases that were examined. 29 percent of the PPAs had a significant impact on policy formulation, both in the World Bank and in country. It is further reported that in only 24 percent of the cases, PPAs had a significant effect on the country's capacity to deliver some policies.

The third chapter identified good practices that should be considered when undertaking participatory policy research for policy change. According to the chapter, emerging good practice builds on the diverse impacts of key variables that were discussed in chapter two. The chapter was divided into three main areas: 'issues to be considered from an institutional perspective within the World Bank', 'good practice when managing a PPA in a country, at the national level, including how to open up the dialogue in participatory policy making', and 'emerging good practice in conducting participatory research with the poor at the community level, and the principles behind this method of data collection'. The chapter argued that there was no unconditional good practice in this type of work because the best approach will always be determined by the context.

The fourth chapter linked PPAs to poverty reduction strategies (PRS). The chapter explained the background to the development of the PRS. It aptly explained how the PPA is relevant to the development of the poverty reduction strategy by focusing on four key features of the PRS that benefit from direct consultations with the poor. The key features were presented as poverty analysis, consultation during formulation of the strategy, monitoring of the implementation of the strategy, and evaluation of outcomes. A deliberate attempt is made to address the question of how poor people can be included in the poverty reduction strategy papers (PRSP). The chapter also linked the PPAs to the IMF's poverty reduction and growth facility, with country examples of the links being highlighted. The chapter concluded that the introduction of the poverty reduction strategy represents a significant shift in development thinking.

The book concluded with very detailed appendixes. Appendix A was PPA Methodologies and discussed the methodologies that were applied in each of the 34 different countries whose PPAs were analyzed by the author of the book. The cost involved in each of the cases was also highlighted. Appendix B was a profile of the impact of PPAs on understanding poverty and policy analysis. This appendix analyzed 27 countries. Appendix C was poverty assessments. A selected set of countries were analyzed (between 1989 -2000). Next, Appendix D was an example of PRA Exercises. This appendix presented Thailand (1998) and Zambia (1996). Appendix E was country case examples of PPA work. In this case, Costa Rica, Mozambique, Pakistan, Uganda, and Zambia were studied. This chapter concluded with Appendix E, which was An Analysis of the Social Aspects of the East Asian Financial Crisis. This analysis focused on the perceptions of poor communities.

The book made a significant contribution to our understanding poverty and how the poor can influence policy. However, it failed to explain how the voice of the poor can be equal to that of the wealthy in a policy dialogue. For instance, how can compromise be reached in cases where the interests and preferences of the poor are at variance with those of the

policymakers (who are mostly wealthy)? Notwithstanding the above, the book was definitely an indispensable asset to our understanding of the nexus between poverty and policy. The book is robust, practical, and easy to understand. In my opinion, it is a must-have for all policymakers, non-governmental organizations, parastatals, and donors who wish to undertake participatory poverty assessments. I further recommend that the book be translated into all the other major languages for the benefit of society.

ABOUT THE REVIEWER:

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