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Rapid Assessments in Urban Areas: Lessons from Bangladesh and Tanzania

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Development organizations and governments frequently undertake rapid assessments because they want to generate a fairly comprehensive, multidimensional picture of the livelihoods of potential project beneficiaries, but they have limited resources and time to devote to longer-term research projects. The size and diversity of the urban environment can complicate the ability of assessments to generate a reliable, representative picture of livelihoods, needs, constraints, and opportunities in urban areas.

This paper suggests how to strengthen rapid assessments in urban areas of developing countries. It briefly describes how two such rapid assessments were carried out by the nongovernmental organization CARE. It highlights the methodological challenges of using rapid assessment procedures in urban areas and notes ways that assessments in Bangladesh and Tanzania responded to these challenges.

The Assessments

In Bangladesh and Tanzania, assessments used both qualitative and quantitative methods to examine characteristics of households and communities to provide a more complete picture of urban livelihoods than could either approach alone. The quantitative household surveys focused on gauging the prevalence or severity of a situation, such as malnutrition. The qualitative surveys, often using participatory techniques, highlighted the behaviors, motivations, and priorities of the residents. The two components together generated a profile of neighborhood characteristics, infrastructure, and institutions. Key informant and large-group interviews provided information on the community, while focus groups explored the livelihoods of specific groups, such as single mothers. In Bangladesh, the assessment was carried out at sites in three cities of varying size. In Tanzania, the assessment was carried out only in Dar es Salaam.

Evaluating Rapid Assessment Procedures

Confidence in the findings from rapid assessments in urban areas can be increased by paying close attention to issues that can pose threats to accepted standards for evaluation: accuracy, reliability, feasibility, utility, and propriety.

Accuracy refers to (1) context: Is the economic, political, social, and cultural context properly described? (2) construct validity: Are the data being correctly interpreted? (3) measurement validity: Is the survey measuring what it intends to measure? and (4) external validity: Are conclusions generalizable? *Reliability* asks the question: Will

the assessment procedures produce the same results repeatedly? *Feasibility* asks: Are the procedures appropriate, affordable, and politically viable? *Utility* asks: Will the results be useful to users? and *Propriety* asks: Are the methods ethical and fair to those involved?

Strengthening Rapid Urban Assessments

The experiences in Bangladesh and Tanzania provided a number of insights about how to strengthen urban rapid assessments.

Accuracy. ♦Context. Macroeconomic conditions and complex social and political entanglements can significantly affect urban livelihoods. Yet rapid assessments frequently focus on individual and household behaviors, downplaying important contextual factors. Use of a conceptual framework highlighted the importance of context. Secondary data reviews provided background information useful to the design of the survey. Key informants and community groups answered questions about environment and broader historical trends. Insights from team members themselves, usually professionals with programmatic experience, also helped elucidate context. ♦Construct validity. Incorporating team members with a variety of disciplinary backgrounds and programmatic experiences, and who were familiar with the sites, was important to ensuring that the data collected were interpreted correctly. ♦Measurement validity. In a city, boundaries of a neighborhood or city are often vague, and "urban" may blend into "rural." To ensure what was intended to be measured was measured, it was important to identify the area that had characteristics of greatest interest, not to determine whether the area itself was "urban" or "rural." In addition, in urban areas knowledge about specific topics may not be shared much among community or family members. Because many household members work away from home, it may be difficult to collect information from the most appropriate person. To interview the most appropriate person, community

organizations announced the community interviews ahead of time, so individuals could plan to attend. Qualitative interviews were carried out in the evenings or on days off. ♦External validity. Neighborhoods are different

and neighborhoods change, reflecting the high mobility of urban residents. In such conditions, it is difficult to generalize findings from one site to another. To capture the diversity of urban conditions, in Bangladesh CARE conducted the assessment in three cities that were "typical"

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of the range of Bangladeshi cities. In Tanzania, CARE collected data in 12 sites across Dar es Salaam, which incorporated a variety of characteristics. The assessments also improved accuracy by corroborating information and by collecting data on the same question from different sources, often using different methods ("triangulation").

Reliability. The representativity of the sample and the ability of those who carry out the assessment are two key factors that affect the reliability of an assessment. In rural areas, assessments often stake out a central location and interview those who come. While crowds may also gather spontaneously in urban areas, those who respond may only work in the community, not live there, and those who live there may work in another part of the city. An informal approach will not give a true picture of community livelihoods. In Bangladesh, CARE worked with local organizations to select key informants and invite specific participants representing a range of community perspectives to interviews. To further reduce the potential for bias, field staff spoke to local political leaders, who might have influenced group responses, separately from the community groups. They purposely included areas with characteristics that might influence outcomes, such as ethnicity or population density, so as not to get a sample that was "biased" through exclusion of these factors. Both assessments used "triangulation" to cross-check information. They improved their own reliability by attending a weeklong training session in qualitative research. And guides for questions were made fairly specific in order to standardize approaches to questioning among staff.

Feasibility. Methods should be culturally sensitive, politically viable, affordable, and relatively easy to implement. Because urban residents may be particularly sensitive to "outside" intrusion and crime is often a problem, CARE worked with knowledgeable local staff and organizations known to neighborhood residents. In that way, CARE could better gauge and address the risks of working in an area. Compared to rural appraisals, urban assessment costs may be lower because survey areas are more compact. This may reduce overall study time and transport costs. If assessment personnel are from the same city as the study, the

organization may also be able to save on travel and per diem expenses for them. On the other hand, it may prove difficult to schedule interviews around work schedules and other demands on the time of urban dwellers. Additionally, urban areas are often compact with few open spaces for interviews. In these assessments, interviews were typically scheduled in places where members of the community might meet, such as schoolrooms.

Utility. To ensure that key actors, from individual households to community leaders to municipal authorities, felt an ownership of the information and understood its usefulness, CARE consulted with them, as well as researchers, donors, and its own staff, to identify the most important issues. In Tanzania, results were presented back to the community leaders and partners, thus heightening the possibility that they would use the findings. Report findings were widely shared with local NGOs, municipal authorities, international and bilateral donors, and other organizations.

Propriety. Respondents should participate voluntarily and know how the information will be used. In quantitative and qualitative surveys, interviewers reviewed the assessment with participants.

Conclusions

The diversity of urban areas presents substantial challenges to the validity of information from rapid assessments, yet CARE's experiences in Bangladesh and Tanzania suggest a number of ways that rapid assessment procedures can be strengthened to address these concerns. The principal challenges can be met through use of representative samples; use of qualitative and quantitative approaches; incorporation of team members with a variety of perspectives and professions; and linkages with local organizations and community members who are familiar with the context.

Keywords: urban livelihoods, rapid assessment, Bangladesh, Tanzania

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