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PATHWAYS FROM POVERTY: A MULTI-COUNTRY STUDY

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Locating pathways

THERE IS EVIDENCE OF SOME SUCCESS in the effort to reduce global poverty. Estimates show that the percentage of the world's population living in poverty declined over the past several decades. Yet much of this progress occurred from 1970 to 1990, and the absolute number of poor has not declined. The World Bank estimates that approximately 1.2 billion people live on no more than a dollar a day, while the United Nations Human Development Report reveals that half the world's population, approximately three billion people, live on fewer than two dollars per day.

The International Fund for Agricultural Development, a United Nations agency, reports that 75% of extreme poverty occurs in rural areas where the principle economy is agriculture. Addressing the challenge of rural poverty requires multiple approaches, since pathways from poverty are not the same for all people in all places. Reducing poverty requires a clear understanding of the factors that predict whether an individual or household will become less poor or more poor over time. BASIS researchers drew on longitudinal data from rural areas in Ethiopia, Philippines and South Africa to analyze why certain households remain trapped in poverty over several years while others are able to escape poverty and build sustainable livelihoods.

The long-term perspective provided by longitudinal data is critical for policy. Intervention programs often are evaluated as successful because of a short-term impact in helping a family escape poverty. Yet, a short-term boost is not always enough to put a household on the way to sustainable economic growth and wellbeing, and many families soon find themselves trapped again in poverty with little prospect of escape. BASIS research helps identify more sustainable regional pathways from poverty, especially those whereby households are able to accumulate productive assets, access institutions that increase the returns on those assets, and minimize the impact that shocks have on asset holdings.

ETHIOPIA

Researchers used data from the Ethiopian Rural Household Survey to examine growth and changes in poverty in 15 communities between 1994 and 2004.

Poverty and perceptions

In the communities, there were considerably lower levels of mean or median consumption per month in the first two years of the survey, 1994 and 1995, compared to 1999 and 2004. The data suggest that the improvements largely occurred in the 1990s and not subsequently. Consumption growth of the mean averaged 2.6% per year, which is not much different from the 2.1% that was the average rate of growth of GDP per capita.

Growth in consumption was accompanied by substantial poverty declines, especially in the 1990s. Inequality in wealth did not significantly increase during this period, so inequality changes are not at the core of poverty reduction. Changes such as liberalization, investment in infrastructure, and agricultural productivity-oriented programs likely had a positive impact in the study villages, as did the relatively good weather in most communities that characterized the second half of the 1990s.

Local perceptions, however, suggest that poverty did not decline as much as the data show. In 2004, 34% of families reported that they fit into the bottom three categories of our survey: “never have quite enough,” “poor,” or “destitute.” When people were then asked to compare their current situation to their situation in 1994, they reported generally that circumstances had become worse since 1994. Only 26% reported themselves to have been in the bottom three categories 10 years earlier, while the reported number of “rich” or “very rich” was considerable. (See table 1.)

Clearly, the perceptions do not square with the quantitative evidence that poverty declined. Yet, when we asked the same households in 1995 to describe their current (that is, 1995) circumstances, 49% reported themselves to be in the bottom three categories of never having quite enough, poor or destitute. Therefore, going by the perceptions of poverty in 1995, there in fact was substantial poverty reduction in the communities; in fact, the decline is close to our estimates when measuring consumption. It may well be that perceptions of wellbeing don’t correlate with current consumption and wealth levels, but rather with a household’s own changes in consumption as well as whether they have been improving at a faster rate than the community.

Causes of poverty decline

The research team examined how road infrastructure and extension programs positively affected consumption growth and poverty reduction. The team also looked at how shocks negatively impact growth and poverty reduction.

Improved road quality has a major effect on growth. Those with access to an improved road appear to have almost 16% higher growth per year than those without. Since overall growth was a few percent per year in per capita terms, good roads are a crucial factor explaining divergence in growth among households. Good roads reduce poverty.

Extension services also appear to contribute to consumption growth and poverty declines. Between 1994 and 2004, extension services contributed to about 0.7% higher growth, relatively small but significant.

Considering the benefits gained through investments in roads and agricultural extension, it was vital to explore whether persistently poor families benefited from roads and extension services to the same extent as better-off households. The results show no significant differences between the chronic poor and the others, suggesting that poorer families did not follow a different growth trajectory. Roads and agricultural extension seem to have benefited the persistently poor.

Droughts and other shocks are common in the region, and so the research team examined the links between shocks and consumption levels in 2004. The team found that, all other factors being equal, drought had a significant impact and led to consumption decreases of about 16%. Other shocks mattered as well, with effects of approximately similar orders of magnitude occurring when output prices collapsed (most notably for maize prices in 2003), or when non-agricultural activities were affected by a drop in demand. Illness shocks were also significant. A household experiencing an illness shock between 1999 and 2004 suffered a 10% loss in per capita consumption when observed in 2004.

In some cases, there isn’t full recovery from a shock. For example, the main drought period was 2002; two years later consumption was still considerably lower due to the drought, and full recovery had not occurred.

Table 1: Household (HH) perception of poverty status, Ethiopia

	In 2004		In 1995
	Do you describe your HH as	Ten years ago, would you describe your HH as	How wealthy do you consider yourself
Very rich	0.4%	6.2%	0.5%
Rich	5.9%	23.2%	5.4%
Comfortable	30.4%	29.7%	19.9%
Manage to get by	29.2%	14.9%	25.4%
Never have enough	13.0%	8.9%	7.9%
Poor	19.9%	16.6%	33.4%
Destitute	1.1%	0.5%	7.6%

Source: Dercon and Hoddinott

Collective action and indigenous institutions can mitigate some shocks, but not as effectively for the poorer families. Belonging to the same *iddir* (burial society) or same labor-sharing group can be a source of assistance, and nearly all households report that they have some sort of network they can call on for help. Since these networks consist largely of other households in the village, the scope for addressing risks is limited because drought shocks lead to reductions in consumption in most households. In other words, during a drought, there is not much that one household can do to help out its neighbor.

Better-off households tend to have larger networks, as do those with relations that have either status or connections within the village. In some localities, *iddirs,* in addition to providing assistance when a member dies, also provide a limited form of health insurance. Where these *iddirs* do so, illness shocks tend to have smaller effects on consumption. *Iddirs* providing this assistance tend to be homogeneous along some dimensions, such as geography or religion, but heterogeneous in other dimensions, such as age structure. They impose membership restrictions that reduce the cost of obtaining information and restrict assistance to a verifiable component of illness shocks, such as medical expenditures. Furthermore, they limit the extent of assistance so that its provision does not come at the cost of financial sustainability.

The results point to the need for realism in assessing the pro-poor benefits of support to collective action. Wealthier and better-educated households tend to participate more in these groups and to have larger networks; therefore, attention must be paid to identifying barriers that prevent the poor from participating in collective action. Realism is also needed in terms of the role of collective action in responding to shocks. Where households have little ability to develop networks outside the immediate region, collective action has limited effectiveness in responding to shocks that affect the whole region. Direct public action is more appropriate in this area. By contrast, collective action may be more suitable for providing insurance in response to shocks, such as illness, that affect individual families.

Public action and policy that support forms of collective action must recognize, as exemplified by the *iddirs*, that successful collective action is based on trust and reciprocity. As trust is easier to destroy than create, the principal of "do no harm" is important, particularly when government actions are aimed toward existing collective-action institutions.

Philippines

Researchers focused on Bukidnon, which is considered the food basket of the Northern Mindanao region. Researchers used the Bukidnon Panel Survey to examine factors contributing to movements out of poverty over almost two decades. They also analyzed the impact of shocks on per capita consumption and the role of local and migrant networks in helping households insure against shocks.

Moving out of poverty

The researchers examined changes in the distribution of households across consumption expenditure quintiles between 1984 and 2003. For child households (who had not yet formed separate households), the 1984 distribution reflects their parents' position in the distribution in 1984. Among parent households in the bottom two consumption quintiles, 64% experienced upward mobility: 28% moved up one quintile and 36% moved up two or more quintiles. Of parent households in the second lowest quintile, 38% of moved up in the consumption distribution. (See table 2, next page.)

Among child households in the same village, 58% in the bottom quintile moved up relative to their parents' position in the consumption distribution in 1984, while 49% in the second lowest quintile improved their positions relative to their parents. Many households did not experience changes in their relative rankings, yet 38% of parent households and 31% of child households in the second lowest quintile in 1984 moved down to the poorest quintile.

The researchers identified factors that helped determine poverty status and also the ability to move out of poverty. Initial levels of human capital (especially schooling) and assets (especially land) are associated with higher probabilities of moving out of poverty, as well as being nonpoor initially. Household demographics also play a key role. Households with a lower dependency ratio 10 years ago have a higher probability of being nonpoor now. Households with a larger household size 10 years ago that were nonpoor have a higher probability of remaining in that state. Households with better-educated heads are more likely to be nonpoor now. Physical capital plays an important role too, with nonpoor households that had more land 10 years ago more likely to remain nonpoor.

Community characteristics are important. Nonpoor households in communities that have a high perception of trust, and with a higher share of people who believe that the government is run for the people, are more likely to remain nonpoor. The construction of an upper secondary school in the last 10 years improves the probability of being nonpoor now as well as the probability of moving out of poverty. Implementation of land reform and a favorable credit index 10 years ago also increases the probability of remaining nonpoor.

In contrast, the number working outside the community 10 years ago is associated with a lower probability of moving out of poverty. Perhaps what matters to household mobility is the number of migrant kin that one can count on for support, rather than the proportion of possibly unrelated migrants outside the community. Unrelated migrants would not be reliable sources of support. Also, it is possible that they migrated because of a lack of opportunities within the community.

Wellbeing

Focus groups held separately among men and women identified factors that affected community wellbeing in the last 10 years. Infrastructure improvements were the most important positive factor mentioned by men (accounting for 38% of the positive responses), followed by the quality of governance (19%) and agriculture-related events (19%). For women, events related to agriculture accounted for 41% of positive events, followed by the quality of governance (29%), and infrastructure improvements (23%).

Both men and women consistently mentioned water system construction as the most important infrastructural development. Within the category of governance, the quality of local government officials made a big difference in wellbeing, especially officials at the *barangay* level, the smallest political unit in the Philippines. Among agriculture-related events, the introduction of sugarcane was the most important positive factor leading to community prosperity, although a small proportion of respondents viewed this as a negative influence.

Eighty percent of male responses and 56% of female responses revolved around a variety of economic factors that negatively impacted wellbeing, namely the high cost of basic commodities, high input costs, and low product prices. Agriculture-related factors, specifically the El Niño-related drought and pest infestation, had the second greatest negative impact, according to both male and female focus groups. Dissatisfaction with government officials (corruption) and the quality of community life (uncooperative residents or crime) were mentioned, yet these factors were relatively unimportant compared to economic factors and agriculture-related shocks.

On the aggregate, households are able to insure their consumption against most shocks, even the worst: drought, crop pests and diseases, and family illness. Yet, particular shocks have larger negative impacts on certain households. Input shocks, that is difficulty in obtaining inputs or high input prices, have a significant negative effect on households with more than the median landholding size and more than six years of schooling. Given that most farmers engage in commercial sugarcane cultivation or corn production

Table 2: Households (HH) change in consumption expenditure, 1984-2003, Philippines

	Original HHs						Child HH in the same village				
	Wealth quintiles (1=lowest), 1984						Wealth quintiles (1=lowest), 1984				
	1	2	3	4	5		1	2	3	4	5
Down 2+			15%	23%	23%				15%	24%	41%
Down 1		38%	26%	30%	15%			31%	21%	22%	22%
0	36%	25%	21%	25%	62%		42%	20%	17%	27%	37%
Up 1	28%	18%	30%	23%			27%	16%	25%	27%	
Up 2+	36%	20%	8%				31%	33%	21%		
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%		100%	100%	100%	100%	100%

Source: Echavez et al.

for sale as livestock feed (production for own consumption is minimal), this result is not surprising. Better-educated households and households with more land under cultivation are more likely to use purchased inputs, and thus are more affected by input shocks.

The impact of death or illness shocks depends on whom within the household is affected. Death of the head or spouse significantly reduces consumption per capita for households that had land in 1984, those above the median landholding size in 1984, those with greater than the median net worth, and those whose head had fewer than six years of schooling. Households that have more land and assets were probably engaged in agricultural production, so their consumption is more vulnerable to the loss of an adult working member, particularly either the head or spouse. Families whose heads are less educated are also more vulnerable when there is a loss of an adult working member.

Households in the Philippines can count on various social and economic networks for support. Membership in formal groups is widespread, with 76% of parent households belonging to at least one group. Parent households belong to an average of 1.6 groups, with the proportion of households belonging to at least one group and the average number of groups to which the household belongs increasing steadily as wealth increases. Thus, the asset poor are less likely to participate in groups.

There are a number of informal networks dealing with social and economic matters: 75% of households report having a network to turn to in case of economic loss, with the better-off households being the best insured against economic loss. As with the formal groups, better-off households have access to larger networks.

A greater number of shocks experienced by parent households increases membership in both formal and informal groups and networks. Interestingly, households that have more daughters living outside the home village have smaller local networks, indicating a possible substitution between local and migrant social capital. The number of groups to which a household belongs has a positive and significant impact on expenditures. Membership in burial, religious, and civic groups has a significant positive impact on per capita expenditures.

Insights from the qualitative work suggest that local networks have only a limited ability to help households cope with shocks. Several respondents mentioned that they feel embarrassed to ask for help from their friends and neighbors, who are also poor and face similar problems. Households use a variety of coping mechanisms: working longer, relying on help from children who have left home and are now working, borrowing money from informal sources, and selling or mortgaging assets.

Migration capital

An interesting finding from the network analysis is the apparent substitutability of "migration" capital and "local" social capital. Migration is an important livelihood strategy in the Philippines. In the study sample, 47% of children 15 and older are migrants to rural, peri-urban, and urban areas in the Philippines, as well as overseas. Similar to the national pattern, most migrants are female.

The researchers investigated the impact of migration and remittances on asset holdings and consumption of parent households. While shocks experienced by parent households do not affect the number of migrant children, the probability of receiving remittances and the amount received increases with the number of shocks experienced by parents.

As a livelihood strategy migration has its tradeoffs. Possibly because parents bear the initial costs of financing migration and often have to support migrants until they are well established, a larger number of migrant children is associated with lower values of nonland assets and total expenditures per adult equivalent. Conversely, remittances significantly increase per capita consumption and holdings of housing and consumer durables. A thousand pesos received by parents can potentially increase values of housing and consumer durables by 5,000 pesos, and total nonland asset values by 12,000 pesos.

Educational expenditures increase significantly with remittances. A thousand pesos received by parents is reflected in a 2,200 peso increase in educational expenditures per adult equivalent. Thus, despite the costs that parents may incur in sending migrants to other communities, the returns in remittances is important in enabling parent households build their stock of assets and invest in the human capital of the next generation.

Given that migration is likely to continue to be an important livelihood strategy in rural areas, the challenge may be to reduce barriers to migration as well as reduce transactions costs for migrants sending remittances. Reducing the costs of sending remittances from overseas is effectively an improvement in the exchange rate faced by remittance senders. Reducing barriers to migration and creating employment opportunities for migrants in destination regions may stimulate investment in human capital, acquisition of assets, and entrepreneurship in sending regions.

South Africa

Researchers used the KwaZulu-Natal Income Dynamics Study (KIDS), a panel survey of households with data from 1993, 1998, and 2004. The findings help show the evolution of poverty in South Africa, and the impact that government transfer programs and the AIDS crisis have on poverty dynamics.

Evolution of poverty

Using monthly per-capita expenditures (inflated or deflated to 2000 prices), 28% of survey households were chronically poor, meaning that in all three waves of the survey these households were below a poverty line suggested by the World Bank of R322 per month per person. While there was some upward mobility among those who were initially poor, more than half the households just above the poverty line in the first wave moved below the poverty level subsequently. The result is that 45% of households were "transitorily poor," that is, they moved in and out of poverty over time. The remaining 27% of households were never poor over the time period. These findings show that, from 1993 to 2004, there existed a core group of persistently poor people, surrounded by a somewhat larger group of the transitorily poor, with a smaller group of those who never experienced poverty. (The figures were slightly different when using income instead of expenditures, with 35% chronically poor, 42% transitorily poor, and 23% nonpoor.)

The expenditure group just above the poverty line appears to be quite unstable. Some 41% of households that had expenditures between 1.0 and 1.5 times the poverty line in 1993 enjoyed expenditures more than 1.5 times the poverty line in 2004. In contrast, 44% of the households fell below the poverty line in 2004, while 14% maintained their position. This pattern, with some households slipping, perhaps to a low level equilibrium, and others rising, perhaps toward a high level equilibrium, is partially consistent with the existence of a poverty trap.

Households that were well above the poverty line in 1993 largely maintained their positions or moved ahead over time. On average, households with expenditures more than 2.5 times the poverty line in 1993 experienced 61% expenditure growth over the 11 years of the study. More than 44% of the households with expenditures in 1993 between 1.5 and 2.0 times the poverty line moved ahead substantially over time, and mean expenditure of this group grew by a massive 160%.

The KIDS data permits measurement of the economic status of the now adult children of the core KIDS respondent households. On average, these children are doing much better than their parents. Further analysis reveals that this group itself comprises two very distinct experiences: a group of sharply upwardly mobile children that is doing much better than their parents, and a similarly sized group that remained residents in the parents' homes and enjoys living standards identical to those of their parents.

Impact of government transfer programs

Underlying the income distribution dynamics revealed by the KIDS data is a mix of market outcomes and the redistributive impact of government taxes and transfers. Researchers examined the impact of government programs on the wellbeing of the KIDS households, especially the improvements in the lower end of the income distribution seen between 1998 and 2004.

This analysis reveals a sharp upward drift in market-generated inequality, which is in line with global patterns of inequality. This inequality is offset to some extent by the effect of the government's transfers and taxes. The biggest change took place between 1993 and 1998, which points towards improvements in the amount and coverage of the Old Age Pension, which was initiated after the 1993 survey. Overall, the analysis suggests that the system works in a progressive way despite limited means-based targeting.

Another key government program is the Child Support Grant (CSG), introduced in 1998. Like similar programs in Latin America, CSG cash transfers are targeted at women. Unlike the Latin America programs, CSG transfers are unconditional, with no strings attached nor with any in-kind transfers.

Taking advantage of the slow program rollout that partially randomized the extent of CSG treatment received by beneficiaries, the researchers estimated the impact these transfers had on child nutrition as measured by child height-for-age. Large dosages of CSG treatment early in life are shown to significantly boost child height. These estimated height gains, in turn, suggest large adult earnings increases for treated children and a discounted rate of return on CSG payments of between a 160% and 230%. While these gains cannot be linked to the overall poverty patterns revealed in the data, they do create hope that such cash transfer programs can break through the poverty trap evidenced in data on poverty dynamics.

Impact of the AIDS crisis

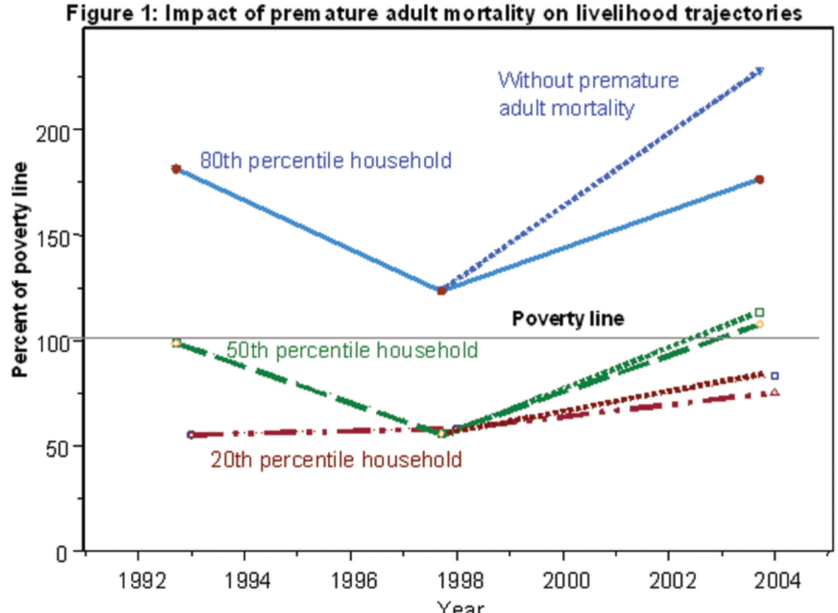
At the end of 2003, 5.3 million people were estimated to be living with HIV in South Africa, the highest number of any country in the world. HIV prevalence among adults 15-49 years of age was estimated at 21.5%, compared to 7.5% in sub-Saharan Africa and 1.1% globally. As the epidemic moves from infection to impact, premature adult mortality (PAM) rates are increasing rapidly, with an estimated 370,000 South Africans dying of AIDS-related illness in 2003, making the disease the leading cause of death in almost all South African provinces. Moreover, while it is thought that HIV prevalence in South Africa may be approaching its plateau, the majority of AIDS-related deaths have yet to happen.

The KIDS data open a window to a pre-HIV era, as well as the period leading up to these high mortality rates. Using impact evaluation econometric methodology, the researchers constructed Figure 1, which shows the estimated impact of an AIDS-related prime age adult death on the evolution of family wellbeing for three types of households: one located in the 20th percentile of the 1993 income distribution, one in the 50th percentile, and one in the 80th.

For each household, an econometrically predicted growth rate (and resulting living standard) was calculated both with and without PAM. As can be seen, the predicted impacts of PAM on the household that began at the 20th percentile are slightly negative, but imperceptibly so. Impacts grow larger for the 50th percentile household, and are quite significant for the 80th percentile household. Regarding the latter, the figures indicate that without PAM, the household would have grown to a living standard in excess of 225% of the poverty line. With PAM, the household's wellbeing is only 175% of the poverty line. This 50% drop can be seen as the impact of PAM on initially better-off households.

Whatever the social and human costs associated with premature adult deaths, the impact on the growth of the economic wellbeing of the household is significantly larger on those just above the poverty line. Recovering some of these economic benefits may be possible through replacing assets or scrimping to make up for lost income; yet, other benefits will not be easily replaced, such as the human capital embedded in the person who has died. In this regard, our data tell a provocative story: better-off households tend to recover as time passes, while less well-off households do not.

Figure 1: Impact of premature adult mortality on livelihood trajectories



Source: Carter et al. Forthcoming.

Different routes to economic wellbeing

The case studies from three different regions of the world show that a household's pathway from poverty can take different routes. The studies also demonstrate that the persistently poor do not always benefit to the same extent as better-off families from certain poverty reduction strategies.

The Ethiopia study shows that improvements in market access through roads, and improved access to agricultural extension, were sources of growth for households regardless of what wealth status they have. Yet, the findings also reveal that the persistently poor did not benefit equally when it came to efforts to mitigate the effects of shocks. With severe droughts and other shocks a common occurrence in the region, this is an area of urgent policy attention.

The Philippines findings show that despite substantial upward mobility in the past two decades, a significant

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proportion of the poorest groups did not improve their status and some declined. Both household-level and community factors play an important role in explaining movements into and out of poverty. Improvements in infrastructure, positive developments in agriculture, and improvements in governance were factors affecting community prosperity. The findings also show that shocks do not affect households equally, membership in formal groups increases per capita consumption but the size of one's informal networks does not, and migrant networks serve an important consumption-smoothing function.

The South Africa findings reveal that close to half the families in the study move into and out of poverty over time, which suggests that these families are susceptible to being caught in a poverty trap. Government transfer programs help reduce the extent of market-generated inequality and may help families escape poverty traps. The transfer programs also help with child wellbeing, which results in increases in earning capacity once the children become adults. Not surprisingly, the findings bear out the significant toll that the AIDs crisis has on economic wellbeing, with BASIS showing that, absent intervention, many less well-off families may never recover economically from an AIDs-related death.

Building on the findings, BASIS continues to define strategies for reducing poverty. Ongoing work focuses on managing risk through financial markets, increasing access to assets, building up and protecting assets, and evaluating the impact of cash transfers programs and insurance products.

Related reading

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