

Identifying the Poor – Group Discussions

Who are the poorest? How do you identify them?

Persons who are in conditions of absolute poverty include those who do not have access to basic essential services like drinking water, basic education, etc.; those, who do not have basic facilities for living like a home, their land for cultivation, animals, etc.; and those, who do not have sufficient economic means to survive with basic dignity.

Poverty means different things in different parts of the world and there can not be a common definition. Poverty is also a relative concept and depends from historical conditions. Keeping this in mind, the following groups can also be considered as poor persons, who are excluded from different political, productive, educational and health processes; those, whose rights and duties are not recognised; those having low self-esteem; those who loose their cultural identity; those who are ashamed about their ethnic origins, perceiving it as the cause of the deterioration of their quality of life; those who are bound by “false” necessities of life; and, those who are not able to defend themselves like orphans and street children.

Among the poor, which groups are more vulnerable?

Poverty creates a vicious circle, so that better off groups benefit more from development interventions while the poorer and more vulnerable groups have more difficulties in accessing and benefiting from development interventions. As far as the question of persons, who are worse off among the poor, different groups include:

- Ethnic minorities are usually worse off, compared to majority groups. In India there is the caste system, people belonging to “lower” castes are targets of social discrimination. Persons belonging to tribal and indigenous groups, usually live far away from cities in isolated areas and forests.
- Women in general and widows, single women, women deserted by their husbands are worse off. In some countries women are branded as witches and are regarded as persons, who are able of doing witchcraft and they are socially ostracised. Illiterate women, wives of alcoholics, wives of men who work at far away places so that the responsibility of managing household is on these women, and wives of men who are at war are also worse off among the poor.
- Persons with disability, persons affected with some diseases, which are associated with social stigma like leprosy, AIDS, venereal diseases, tuberculosis, etc. are worse off.
- Displaced communities, refugees of war and natural calamities, victims of disasters and migrants are usually worse off.

- A new class of poor is rising, people who become poor because of losing jobs because of new policies and new labour saving technologies adopted in industries.
- Elderly people without social and family support systems are often worse off compared to others.
- Those who do not have their own income, those who are not involved in productive activities like children, disabled persons and elderly persons.
- Those, who do not any choice or alternatives like prostitutes, refugees, prisoners, etc.
- Those, who lack the voice like mentally disabled persons, persons suffering from terminal diseases, infants killed at birth or killed before birth.
- Persons who have lack of opportunities for self development due to lack of education, lack of professional qualifications, lack of identity

Is Poverty different in Rural and Urban settings?

Rural poverty is characterised by isolation, long distances from any public or private services, more fragile economic and alimentary situation, also because in rural areas, persons are more vulnerable to climatic conditions, natural disasters and wars. In the rural areas community organisation is easier than in urban areas.

On the other hand, urban poor also have economic and alimentary fragility but reasons may be different because it may depend upon the kind of work a person is able to find every day, so their situation varies daily. At the same time, some times in urban settings, the family, social and community relations and references may be threatened, so the poor families can not respond to the stress of poverty. At the same time, in urban situations the general life conditions show greater degradation and stress (for example from criminality and prostitution), especially for some groups of persons like street children. In urban areas goods and services are available but the urban poor have less access to these compared to the better-off persons. At the same time in urban areas, there is greater influence of mass media and other communications, so that people are incited to be more consumistic. The urban poor, because they live in the midst of plenty, there is more frustration and anger than in the rural poor, which very often lead to violence and crime. Planning any specific interventions for urban poor may be very difficult since their numbers are enormous.

Measurable Indicators for Identifying More Poor and Vulnerable Groups:

Any direct indicators for identifying the persons who are more at risk and are more vulnerable should not be defined a priory, because these indicators are very much dependent upon the local context. For example issues like how many times does the person manage eat in a day, what kind of food can the person get, what kind of clothes can the person wear, etc. can be useful in some

contexts. Such criteria and indicators should be defined on the basis of priority needs identified by the communities.

Some of the possible indicators can be linked to factors like the ownership of land in rural areas, the ownership of house in urban areas and access to means of livelihood. Each country may have its own policy regarding people who are behind the poverty line, and this could be another criteria for deciding.

Identification of objective and measurable criteria should be in relation with geographical areas and kinds of interventions. For example, in a group of Yanomami in Brazil, we may look at issues like malnutrition among children, number of new disabilities due to leprosy, etc. On the other hand, depending upon the type of intervention like access to land for landless peasants, maternal education, public awareness campaigns, etc., we may need to look at different specific groups in the communities.