



Working with Community Groups: does it tackle or reinforce spatial poverty traps: experiences from Uganda

A paper prepared for the international workshop “*Understanding and addressing spatial poverty traps: an international workshop*” 29 March 2007, Spier Estate, Stellenbosch, South Africa. Hosted by the Chronic Poverty Research Centre and the Overseas Development Institute¹.

Robert Waswaga, CDRN, Uganda

This extended abstract is based on CDRN experience in working with and researching on the rural community based group in Uganda. It examines the assumption of tackling spatial poverty traps through working with groups in Uganda. It concludes that the approach can either perpetuate (by being exclusionary) or reduce spatial poverty depending on a number of actors. Some tips (next steps) are suggested in improving the effectiveness of the approach in tackling rural poverty in Uganda.

Background to the issues

Uganda is a pre-dominantly rural country with over 86 % of Uganda’s population living in rural areas and 72% engaging in agriculture as their main source of livelihoods. Out of estimated 27 million people in Uganda, 31% living below the poverty line². It is also estimated that chronic poor form 20% of the total population. The majority of these chronic poor people live and survive in rural areas thus making spatial poverty traps inevitable.

The Government and Non-Government Organisations (NGOs) are aware of the multitudes of the rural population that are poor and have thus designed programmes to respond to the challenges of spatial poverty traps in rural areas. These development actors are unconsciously engaging with spatial poverty through among others different agriculture, health, and microfinance programmes. A key approach to programme delivery is working through groups or community based organisations including savings and credit cooperative societies (SACCOS). Working through groups also grounded in social organisation history on social safety nets established in communities through working in community-wide or special interest groups.

It is important to note that behind the above approach is the widely-held and dominant belief that the needs and interests of poorer people are directly or indirectly represented through community-based organisations, and that working with CBOs is therefore a best route to poverty reduction. The groups present an opportunity of a multiple effect in poverty reduction.

A re-examination of the above belief or assumption reveals that working through groups without a careful consideration of different issues can considerably promote social exclusion and failure to eliminate spatial poverty. The crux of this paper is to examine this assumption and demonstrate how the assumption can be used to eliminate social exclusion in rural areas but also covertly promote it without putting in consideration key issues. The paper is based on CDRN research work and experience gathered during her work with rural based groups in different parts of Uganda. The reflective questions include:

¹ With thanks to the workshop sponsors: Chronic Poverty Research Centre, Overseas Development Institute, Trocaire, Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC).

² UBOS (2004) National Population census report

- a) How does working with groups in rural areas promote or fight social exclusion and spatial poverty traps?
- b) What do the poor say about social exclusion exercised within groups? What are the voices of excluded chronic poor about working in groups?
- c) What categories of group can promote social inclusion and contribute to eliminating spatial poverty traps in Uganda?
- d) What actions do we need to take as we work with groups in reducing spatial poverty?

CDRN Interface with Rural Groups in Uganda

Community Based Organisations and groups form a vital institutional structure in rural Uganda. These groups include: self help groups – usually informal with unwritten rules; and externally stimulated groups – whose formation is stimulated by external actors. The latter are normally used to deliver government and NGO programmes to the communities in rural areas. It is assumed that these groups form a best channel of reaching the chronic poor.

Self-help groups usually include a high proportion of the poorer members of the community amongst their members, and thus are representative of the poor in the proportional sense of representation. Self-help groups though are not normally considered in during delivery of programmes in rural areas. This act leaves the poor trapped in their poverty. This is because they cannot meet the rules of government, NGOs and donors yet despite their informal status and absence of legal documents, self-help groups tend to be beneficial to the poorer sections of the community. Group benefits go directly to individual members of the group. Entry and exit is usually not governed by complex rules; the group functions as a 'loose' organization bound by trust amongst its members.

Externally-stimulated small economic groups are largely composed of women and are usually dominated by the better-off members of the community. While externally-stimulated economic groups do include poorer members, such individuals are usually in the minority, and tend to be ordinary group members rather than group leaders.

CDRN Experience Group Social Exclusion and Spatial Poverty

Through experience, CDRN has observed that there is a general lack of poorer people's participation in government programmes such as NAADS³. This is not because poorer people do not belong to groups, but rather because the groups that they belong to fail to comply with the standards of legitimacy set by government programmes. Such factors of legitimacy – formality, registration and a focus on a commercial agricultural enterprise – are the very things, which militate against many poor people taking part in formally-constituted small economic groups.

In addition, the exclusion measures are not only from without but also from within groups. The spatially trapped poor are prevented from joining and enjoying the benefits of being in group and consequently integration in government rural poverty reduction programmes due to lack of supportive attitudes by members of externally formed groups; class barriers in villages; lack of empowerment and room for voicing

³ NAADS is a Government of Uganda programme designed to develop a demand-driven, client oriented and farmer-led agricultural service delivery system particularly targeting the poor and the women. NAADS programme was born as a result of the failure of traditional extension approach to bring about greater productivity and expansion of agriculture, despite costly Government interventions. (Master document of the NAADS Task Force and Joint Donor Groups, 2000)

their concerns and interests; specialty in certain areas. For example, strong class barrier between the better off and the poorer community members. The village “middle class” perceives the poor as being “bad hearted”, naturally lazy, uncooperative and have no initiative to engage in group activities. The marginalised and excluded, such as minority ethnic groups, those of unsound mind and the destitute, are sometimes feared, thought of as being surrounded by mysterious powers and bad omens. This generates fear and resentment from others, preventing any meaningful interaction, including group membership⁴.

The poor in rural areas are too well aware of what the better off think about them. This erodes their esteem and confidence, which keeps them away from groups and gatherings. This leaves some of the poor in an information shadow thus re-enforcing the self exclusion and poverty trap. They hardly get information about groups, especially formal groups with external linkages and the new programs that might benefit such groups - a vicious circle.

Poorer people’s interests are less represented in groups that have bigger formality requirements, which demand high costs in terms of membership fees. Such requirements and costs at once act as effective exclusion mechanisms for poorer community members, and as criteria for formal legitimacy

Conclusion and Next Steps

In conclusion, the approach of reaching the poor by targeting or working with groups is partially defective as it is not always the case that poor people can be found in groups or community based institutions. Very few chronically poor people are in groups that meet external actor requirements. Instead the poor are trapped in their own self-help groups that cannot meet prescribed requirements for accessing government services. In this case, working with groups without examining the degree of inclusiveness of the poor is a covert attempt of ensuring that the excluded rural poverty stricken households are perpetually trapped in poverty. One the other hand, failure to work with self-help groups that can meet external criteria is denying the chronic poor the chance to get out of the spatial traps.

Therefore, in eliminating rural poverty traps we need to create opportunities for the rural chronically poor people to present or claim their rights and participate in rural poverty reduction programmes. In this way, we shall be facilitating spatial poverty trap victim to get better integrated into the national economies. The following actions are needed in this war against social exclusion and perpetuation of special poverty traps:

- Examine the membership composition of groups or CBOs before working with them in poverty reduction programme.
- The external actors (donors, governments and NGOs) should introduce flexible terms of working with the groups
- Informal groups should be supported to meet minimum requirements without distorting the internal dynamics and flexibility in management and responding to membership needs.

⁴ CDRN (2004) et al Find the group and you have found the poor.