

NOTE FROM THE FIELD

First Look: Poverty Tools Practicality

Practicality testing in Senegal of USAID's poverty tools imparts lessons and challenges.



Enterprise Works/VITA - Senegal

Pre-test field interview during the surveyor team training in Ziguinchor. From left, surveyors Ibrahima Cisse and Oulimata Coly, and an interviewee.

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Results are beginning to come in from the accuracy and practicality tests of the [Poverty Assessment Tools](#) project, implemented by the [IRIS Center](#) through USAID's [Accelerated Microenterprise Advancement Project](#). Enterprise Works/VITA (EWV) is among 14 practitioner organizations conducting practicality tests. Christophe Poublanc, of EWV Senegal, submitted this account of some of the initial challenges and lessons learned emerging from that effort; a final, comprehensive report was submitted to IRIS at the end of November 2005. Poublanc explains:

"In October 2005, EWV initiated practicality testing of the Poverty Assessment Tools in the Casamance region of Senegal, an isolated area whose economy has been adversely affected by conflict resulting from a 20-year separatist rebellion. Working there since July 2001 with funding from USAID, EWV has been assisting micro, small, and medium enterprises in a limited number of high-impact sub-sectors to help them generate income and employment and assist in the stabilization of the region and its economy. The focus areas have included irrigation for small-scale cash-crop gardening, off-season vegetable production, cashew processing, and improved access to potable water in rural areas. Aimed at sustainability and economic self-sufficiency, EWV's approach has been refined over the years to offer clients solutions that require small initial investment and yield substantial economic benefits, while ensuring eventual independence from external assistance. By helping entrepreneurs identify and take advantage of opportunities and resources and to address constraints effectively, EWV has provided the tools and the capacity necessary for its clients to continue improving the local earning potential and living conditions long after the organization's activities in the area have come to an end.

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"To monitor progress toward achievement of program goals, EWV has relied on its well-developed Impact Tracking System (ITS). Although the ITS is an extremely effective tool to measure program impact, it is not designed to help EWV capture the poverty level of clients. We have always known that EWV's work contributes to poverty alleviation both directly and indirectly, but we have never had the tools to measure that impact. For this reason, EWV was pleased to have the opportunity to participate in IRIS's USAID-supported poverty tools practicality tests, both to learn more about the new poverty assessment tools and to get a chance to test them first-hand with our clients. Although this was important information for EWV, the process of testing the tools taught us invaluable lessons that we had not anticipated.

"From the beginning of the process, the challenges for EWV staff charged with testing were many. Those who participated in IRIS's intensive, week-long assessment tools training session in Washington, DC, in September 2005 needed to absorb the information presented so they, in turn, could teach the surveyors in the Casamance. When the staff returned to Senegal, the focus turned to sampling selection, training local surveyors, assessing necessary data analysis and input, and conducting the much anticipated survey of 200 project clients. Staff had to decide how best to achieve a representative sample of clients. They chose to stratify the sample based on (1) percentage of budget allocations to each activity and (2) variables such

as rural versus urban areas, group versus individual enterprises, and female versus male respondents.

"The training of the surveyors in the Casamance produced additional obstacles. The testing goals of the poverty assessment tool survey were complex, with a major focus on qualitative data that used surveyors' feedback to get a better idea of the positive and negative aspects of the questionnaires. The English questionnaire had to be translated into French, and then translated again into the three local languages: Diola, Mandinka and Wolof. This step was particularly important since the quality of the data gathered would be highly dependent on both surveyors' and respondents' ability to understand what input was being sought.

"The survey included a set of 23 questions. The first nine addressed seemingly basic characteristics of the respondents—i.e. their age and sex—and their households, such as number of household members per gender. Given that in Africa the notion of family and households is quite large and flexible, surveyors had to have a clear understanding of how the criteria were defined. For example, the generic version of the tool had defined a household member as someone who had spent at least six of the last 12 months in the household. The Senegalese, however, are mobile and can spend a few months with an uncle before going back to their parents' house, where they would surely be considered a member of the household.

"The question, 'How much does the household need per month to

live? (in order to meet all basic needs adequately)' drew the highest level of falsification. At first, we assumed we would encounter resistance to the question because it is a very private matter, but that was not the difficulty. The surveyors and local inhabitants agreed that the answers were often inflated. When trying to explain this problem, surveyors said that perhaps respondents were hoping we would come back with financial help based on their answers. Everybody knows it is an important part of the culture to be a good bargainer in Africa. It is like negotiating one's salary: start high and come down.

"Even after tailoring some of the generic indicators to the local context, surveyors found some questions difficult to ask. For example, there were four 'yes or no' questions about the ownership of household items: a cell phone, musical instrument, generator, and vacuum cleaner. In the course of tailoring the indicators, the surveyors suggested changing vacuum cleaner to air conditioner, as it is more appropriate to the African context, where vacuum cleaners are unknown. During the survey implementation, however, surveyors found they were uncomfortable asking the question about air conditioners to people they knew clearly could not afford one; they did not want to insult the respondents.

"The practicality testing was a challenging experience, and difficulties arose where least expected. Nonetheless, the process of surveying helped EWV gain practical insight from its clients, simply by interacting with them from a new position

and at a different level. The surveyors thanked us for the good organization of the survey—a product of the strong framework provided by IRIS's excellent training. During our last group discussion with the surveyors, several of them said they are interested in becoming surveyors because they felt they learned a lot from the interviews and developed a new understanding of both others and themselves.”

For more information about the Poverty Assessment Tools project and the progress of the testing phase, please visit
www.povertytools.org.

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