



NOTE FROM THE FIELD

Understanding Poverty

USAID tests poverty measurement tools



NIDA's team of enumerators strategizing on their household surveys.

"Poverty assessment data from Uganda will be analyzed to better understand which poverty indicators can... determine a household's poverty status."

Charity Irungu, consultant for the Center for Institutional Reform and the Informal Sector (IRIS), contributed this week's Note, which describes her experience field testing poverty assessment tools for USAID's Microenterprise Development team under the Accelerated Microenterprise Advancement Project.

Uganda was chosen as the third country case, after Peru and Bangladesh, in the accuracy test phase of the Poverty Assessment Tools project. As described in the Note from Peru, the 2003 amendment to the Microenterprise for Self-Reliance Act mandated the development of poverty assessment tools to determine the number of very poor beneficiaries of USAID microenterprise funding. The first phase of the project tests the predictive capacity of a variety of poverty measurement indicators. During this phase, households are surveyed in Bangladesh, Uganda, Peru and Kazakhstan—one country in each of the four main USAID regions. Dr. Irungu worked with Nkoola Institutional Development Associates (NIDA) to implement a survey of 800 Ugandan households during July–November 2004. The team successfully adapted its work to Uganda's challenging environment, including multiple languages, conflict, AIDS, and even wildlife. Dr. Irungu elaborates:

"Training, pre-testing, and subsequent adjustments were made to the survey instrument in July. The language variation in Uganda dictated that the poverty assessment tools be translated into five different local languages.

"Uganda is an agriculturally rich country, and the survey questions on food were not as straightforward as one might assume. During the adaptation of the questionnaire, we ended up with a long list of food-stuffs because the survey team could not agree on what should be left out. In addition, questions that address lack of access to food were irrelevant, since under normal circumstances, most Ugandans have no difficulty finding food on a daily basis in a countryside well endowed with animals and edible wild plants. Likewise, the cultural and regional diversity made it difficult to identify inferior foods. Foodstuffs considered inferior in some regions are staples or delicacies in others.

"Once these survey preparations were completed, three teams collected data from early August to late October, after which the data were submitted to IRIS for analysis.

"Civil strife continues to plague Uganda's northern region and as a result, about 12.1% of the national population was excluded from the sampling. The security concerns, the complications of traveling with police escorts, and the difficulty of visiting each household twice rendered it absolutely necessary to exclude households in this area.

"A few, but fairly manageable challenges emerged during the surveying. In a region struggling with the AIDS pandemic, questions on recent deaths, chronic illness and incapacitation of close relatives and major breadwinners elicited mixed reactions. In some homes, a generation was missing, and the team met only the very aged and the very young, who had difficulty answering the questions. In one household, the elderly grandmother had died in between the survey team's visits, leaving only young grandchildren who could not respond to our questions.

"Information on a family's financial well-being, such as value of assets owned and level of savings, was not given freely. Culturally, it is considered bad practice to reveal one's financial worth to strangers. This norm, coupled with the fear of robbery and of appearing boastful meant that the interviewer had to carefully cultivate the respondents' confidence. A particularly difficult survey question was the "Ladder of Life," which asks households to place themselves on the rung of a ladder according to their wealth status within the community. Apart from initial difficulty in understanding the concept, couples could not agree at once on where to place themselves.

"Property valuation was another challenge. For many rural households, this was the first time anyone had asked them to value their dwellings and other property. Urban dwellers were suspicious of the interviewers' motives.

"Random sampling led the survey team to remote areas, which present their own unique challenges. The arrival of our team sent the inhabitants of one village running for their lives, fearing the rebels had finally arrived. After introductions and reassurances, everyone requested to be included in the sample. In one instance, an enumerator tried to cross the bush in order to visit a homestead. Defiant monkeys blocked her way and sent her running in fear!

"More on the survey, including the survey instruments, field reports from Nkoola Institutional Development Associates, and my own observations, can be found on the project website at
<http://www.povertytools.org>."