

Multidimensional Poverty and Identification of Poor Households: A Case from Kerala, India

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Abstract In this paper we compare and contrast the view on poverty of lay people, who are affected by the policies, with that of academics and policy-makers. Drawing from fieldwork in a village in Kerala, India, and applying the 'participatory numbers' approach, we devise a 'local method' to identify poor households, based on the villagers' poverty criteria. The local method is then compared with the official methods used by the national and the state governments. Based on the results, we argue for the need to take into account local dimensions of poverty, in addition to objective/universal dimensions, in the design of poverty reduction programmes. Our findings also suggest that effective risk-mitigation strategies must be devised to help poor households cope with shocks and stresses as well as to prevent the vulnerable non-poor from falling into poverty.

Key words: Multidimensional poverty, Vulnerability, Participatory numbers, Methods, Below poverty line, Kerala

Operationalizing multidimensional approaches to poverty

The focus on multidimensionality of poverty emerged out of the limitations of the income approach in capturing the many aspects of well-being (McGee and Brock, 2001; Saith, 2005). Working within the contours of economics, the capability approach attempted to enhance the understanding of the nature and causes of poverty by shifting attention from 'means' (such as income) to 'ends' that people have reason to pursue and to the 'freedoms' that will help achieve these ends (Sen, 2000, p. 90). Just as monetary measures like a-dollar-a-day

could facilitate international comparisons in purchasing power parity terms, capability-based indices such as the Human Development Index helped monitor progress in multidimensional well-being at a macro level (Anand and Sen, 1994). Deriving methodological strength from non-economic social sciences like anthropology and sociology, social exclusion (Atkinson, 1998) and participatory (Chambers, 2007a) approaches took the debate on multidimensionality further. Whereas the former defines poverty as exclusion from the normal activities relative to a particular society, the latter relies on definitions of poverty used by lay and poor people themselves.

Prior research has attempted to compare the different approaches to poverty, especially the income approach with the rest. The results of these studies, in general, point to divergences between them. The seminal work of Jodha (1988) concluded that households in a village in Rajasthan in India were better-off, over time, in local indicators of well-being, even while they had become poorer in money-metric terms. Shaffer (1998), in a comparison of gender-related consumption poverty with local people's perceptions in the Republic of Guinea, found that the former showed women to be no less poor than the men, whereas the latter revealed the multidimensional deprivation that women faced. Research in Peru by Franco (2003) also indicated the relatively little overlap that existed between income measures of poverty and the perceptions of lay people on ill-being. Comparing empirically the income, capability, social exclusion and participatory approaches to poverty, Ruggeri Laderchi *et al.* (2003) concluded that the number of people identified as poor depends on the definition of poverty used and the actors who define poverty. In a more substantive examination, Shaffer (2005) points out that the income and the participatory approaches rest on different epistemological positions, and hence the results from them are not comparable.

The participatory approach is the broadest of approaches to poverty. It seeks to provide an alternative to expert-led approaches whereby lay and poor people themselves define poverty. The methods used are flexible, often evolving during field studies, thus aiming to reflect local realities better. For the promoters of the participatory approach, it results in power reversals from experts to lay people, ultimately resulting in their empowerment (Chambers, 1995, 2007a). Moving beyond the community-level Participatory Rural Appraisal exercises of the 1980s, the latter half of the 1990s saw the mainstreaming and scaling up of the approach with leading international development agencies incorporating participatory components in their programmes and projects. The Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers initiated by the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank that aimed at influencing national policies, as well as the several Participatory Poverty Assessments conducted by the World Bank (Robb, 1999; Narayan *et al.*, 2000), are examples.

Critics have, however, disputed the claims to empowerment of mainstream participatory approaches. Participatory Rural Appraisal exercises at the community level generally restrict themselves to methodological concerns, thereby overlooking the underlying structural determinants of well-being and power relations (Cleaver, 1999; Francis, 2001). Moreover, such

approaches ignore the politics of participation (Williams, 2004). It has been argued that country-level participatory processes such as Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers fell short of their stated objectives of inclusion and partnership (Brown, 2004). The proponents of mainstream participatory approaches themselves were critical of the way the results of large-scale Participatory Poverty Assessments were incorporated into international policy documents (Chambers, 2001). Even as we acknowledge such critique, we have used participatory methods in this paper since they are the most appropriate to bring out multiple local dimensions of poverty.

In the extant literature dealing with operationalizing the multidimensional approach to poverty, the choice of dimensions (Alkire, 2002, 2007) and the weighting of indicators (Qizilbash, 2004) are the issues that have frequently been addressed. Relatively less attention has been given to the question of whether the view on poverty of those who are affected by the policies converges with that of academics and policy-makers. While it is true that participatory research has delved into the gaps between the views on poverty of actors operating at different levels on poverty (such as experts versus villagers) and was emphasized on bridging these (Chambers, 1995; McGee, 2004), specific case studies can throw more light on this. McGee (1999) used participatory methods to identify poor households in a village in Colombia, based on the perceptions of the villagers on poverty, and compared the results with those arrived at by applying the method used by the government. The study noted divergences between the two, indicating that the government targeted households different from those identified poor by the villagers using their own criteria. Such studies are important since the differences in the understanding of poverty between academics, policy-makers and lay people may lead to poorly designed poverty targeting programmes.

In this paper, we compare and contrast the view on poverty of lay people in a village in Kuttanad region in Kerala, India, with that of the national and state governments. Drawing from field research, we devise a 'local method' to identify poor households in the area, based on local peoples' poverty criteria. We generate locally relevant 'numbers' from qualitative fieldwork, thus contributing to the attempts to combine qualitative and quantitative approaches (Kanbur, 2003) and the evolving paradigm of 'participatory numbers' (Mayoux and Chambers, 2005; Chambers, 2007b). Based on a survey of selected households, we examine the extent to which the local method converges or diverges with the multidimensional methods used by the national (Below Poverty Line Census 2002 method) and the state governments (Kerala *Kudumbashree* method) in identifying poor households.

Official methods to identify poor households in India and Kerala

Beginning from 1992, the Government of India has been conducting a quinquennial below poverty line (BPL) census to identify poor households in rural

areas to be targeted for assistance. Taking into account the widespread dissatisfaction over the income and expenditure methods used in 1992 and 1997, respectively, the Government of India, on the basis of expert recommendation, adopted an indicator-based method for the 2002 BPL census. The new method — henceforth ‘the BPL method’ — identifies poor households using 13 indicators relating to size of landholding, type of house, availability of clothing, food security, sanitation, ownership of consumer durables, literacy status, status of labour, means of livelihood, status of children, type of indebtedness, reasons for migration and assistance preferred from the government. Each of these could be scored from zero to four so that score for a household could range from a minimum of zero to a maximum of 52 (Sundaram, 2003). The higher the score, the better-off is a household.¹

Its weaknesses (Hirway, 2003; Jain, 2004) notwithstanding, we see the new BPL method as an attempt to view poverty and identify poor households through a multidimensional lens, off the track from income-based or consumption-based approaches.

Taking a broader stance, since the late 1990s, the Government of Kerala in south-western India has been using a multidimensional method oriented to the settings of the region — henceforth ‘the Kerala method’ — to identify poor households in the state.² Originally developed by non-governmental organizations (Plummer and de Cleene, 1999; Vijayanand, 2001) and subsequently implemented through Kerala’s decentralized government bodies (*panchayats*), the method uses nine core indicators and eight additional criteria to identify poor households. The core indicators relate to housing, water, sanitation, literacy, income sources, food, presence of infants, presence of alcoholics and caste/tribe. The eight additional criteria relate to contextual factors to be taken into account wherever applicable. The presence of four or more of the core indicators qualifies the household to be categorized as poor (a ‘risk family’), while households with eight or all of the indicators present are placed in the very poor (‘destitute’) category (Government of Kerala, 2004). Identification of poor households, as envisaged in the Kerala method, has to be done through the neighbourhood groups (*ayalkoottangal*), comprising households that live in proximity. The process involves discussions and a final consensus among participants. The method assumes that perfect knowledge of each other ensures transparency in identifying poor households. At present, the Government of Kerala uses two slightly different sets of indicators to identify poor households in urban and rural settings to account for their dissimilarities. We will apply the indicators used in rural areas for this study.

The remaining part of the paper is organized as follows. The next section describes the location and methodology of the study. The ensuing sections present the results. Firstly, a summary of the local method is given. Secondly, the official methods are compared with the local method. Two specific cases each of convergence and divergence among the different methods are also illustrated. This is followed by a discussion of the conceptual

issues raised by the study and a comparative summary of the three methods. The final section highlights the policy implications.

Location and methodology of the study

One of the agro-ecological zones of Kerala, Kuttanad is characterized by contiguous blocks of vast paddy fields (*paadasekharams* or polders) surrounded by protective man-made dykes outside which lie natural canals and rivers. Houses are situated on the dykes as well as on elevated pieces of land inside the polders. The population density is high, with numerous small houses lying side by side on the dykes. Much of the polders of Kuttanad are land reclaimed from backwaters of the Vembanad lake in the early part of the nineteenth century (Narayanan, 2003). Since they lie below mean sea level, during the off-season the polders are immersed in water. Water is pumped out before the onset of cultivation and let in during irrigation.

A simplistic model of life in Kuttanad would comprise of three elements: the farmer, the agricultural labourer and rice. This model is fast becoming irrelevant. Firstly, the encounter with modernity has shifted the occupational interests of the younger population from the primary to the services sector. Secondly, in addition to low profits from agriculture, this has made rice cultivation shrink. Furthermore, human intervention in the once pristine ecological landscape has resulted in acute drinking water scarcity, decline of fish wealth and pollution. The study village exhibits the characteristics, natural as well as socio-economic, typical of Kuttanad. It is remote, being accessible only by water. In addition, the village is widely perceived as backward and has limited access to safe drinking water.

Methodology

Field research lasted from August 2004 to March 2005. It involved a community-level study to derive local meanings of poverty, followed by a survey of selected households.

The community-level study involved focus group discussions, informal interviews, observation and triangulation. Local meanings of poverty were derived through structured group discussions. It was explained that the purpose of the study was purely academic, which may or may not benefit the area in future, and that the researcher would like to know what the villagers meant by 'being poor' and whom did they consider to be poor and not poor in that community. Notes were taken during the discussion. Notes from all the discussions were eventually compared and the recurring common dimensions were identified. However, no prioritization of the dimensions or ranking of the intensity of variation within each dimension (weighting) was made. The weights were assigned later based on triangulation of information gathered from a number of sources, which is elaborated in the next section.

The significant feature of our methodology is the use of ‘participatory numbers’ (Chambers, 2007b). The proponents of this approach argue that, contrary to conventional wisdom, participatory research methods can generate both qualitative and quantitative data (Mayoux and Chambers, 2005). The key difference is that while traditional qualitative or quantitative data are collected, analysed and used by experts, participatory numbers ensures some level of involvement of the lay people in collection, analysis and/or use of data from community research. As noted above, we relied on local peoples’ descriptions (‘words’) to generate indicators (‘numbers’) of poverty and vulnerability, thereby following a *basic* participatory numbers approach.

For the survey, we selected 100 households in the village, based on a purposive sample (Bernard, 2002, pp. 182–184). Along with information on key household characteristics, data on the dimensions of poverty in the BPL, Kerala and local methods were also collected during household interviews.

Analysis

Preliminary analysis involved categorization of households according to the BPL, Kerala and local methods. Subsequently we compared the outcomes from the BPL and the Kerala methods with the local method. The BPL method does not have a prior poverty cut-off value to categorize households, but only a scoring system, as we noted earlier. We ranked the households according to BPL scores. We then compared the BPL scores and ranks with the classification and ranking of households according to the local method. The Kerala method, on the other hand, has a poverty cut-off value. We categorized households as poor and non-poor accordingly. We then compared the Kerala categorization with the classification and ranking according to the local method.

We will now describe the local method to identify the poor households in the village that we developed in consultation with the local people.

Local method to identify poor households

The initial discussions suggested that ‘what you earn’ (*varumaanam*) must be the key determinant of poverty. However, probing further revealed the insecurity of the local people for the future, which they associated with different occupations.

We can stretch from one day to another if we have labour ... no problem ... but we do not have anything left...we are not sure about what will come next. (An agricultural labourer)

Agriculture is not at all profitable these days ... it is risky ... many of us invest every season by borrowing [from money lenders and the banks] and even pawning [women’s] jewellery ... but nobody can predict ... (Farmer)

Agriculture is a lottery ... worst are the conditions of those who take land on lease and lose everything ... (Farmer)

'Livelihood insecurity' was thus taken as the key determinant of poverty and the core criterion in identifying poor households. A poor household in the village is one that does not have steady income and a secure means of livelihood. Households were categorized into four groups based on primary means of livelihood of the household head: very poor, poor, non-poor/better-off and secure/well-off.

- (a) *Very poor*: *Theere paavapetta* or *pattini* were the most common terms used to denote the very poor. The 'very poor' are the 'hungry households'; however, none of the households in the village fit in this category at that time. Local people noted that although many households cut food intake, especially during the monsoon (June–August) when the people are off from work and the school year begins for the children, there is no household that 'goes hungry' (*pattini*). However, a few of them remarked that there might be households who are hungry, but even close neighbours may not know it.

You cannot say for sure ... people are proud (*abhimaanam*) ... who will want to tell you that she is hungry (*pattini*) ... self-esteem is everything.

In general, the view was that the village and Kuttanad as a whole have undergone much transformation over the past few decades, resulting in the elimination of hunger. Since the early 1980s, a second crop has been in cultivation in the village. Although there is a widely prevalent view that fertility and productivity have declined as a result of the second crop, villagers noted that it provided more labour days for the population, thereby eliminating hunger.

- (b) *Poor*: The terms used to denote the poor were *paavapetta* or, less often, *onnum kittapporillaatha* and *daridra*. The 'poor' category included agricultural labour households and other labour households in ascending order. Other labour households included fish workers, construction workers and casual labourers in no particular order. However, agricultural labour households were viewed as the 'real poor'. As a caveat, it must be noted here that there are few purely agricultural labour households in Kuttanad. As elsewhere, people try to engage in multiple occupations to diversify the sources of income. Many agricultural labour households are farmers as well, often undertaking paddy cultivation in leased land or on the small piece of farmland they own. Nevertheless, the general perception was that labour in the field is 'dirty'. The older generation did not want their children to take up an agricultural labourer's job. The younger generation would be better "staying unemployed and looking for a job" or "escaping to the (Persian) Gulf" than working as an agricultural labourer.

- (c) *Non-poor/better-off*: The terms *paavapettavarallatha*, *saamanyam mechchapetta* or *sthira varumaanakkaar* were used to denote the non-poor/better-off. This category included toddy tappers, farmers, Gulf migrants and government employees in ascending order. Toddy tappers are the traditional local beer brewers belonging to the Ezhava caste (Osella and Osella, 2000). Although labourers, they are non-poor since they are highly organized and have employment round the year. Farmers were viewed as the 'vulnerable non-poor'. Most of them are Syrian Christians and have traditionally been farmers. They are 'vulnerable' for two reasons. Firstly, a crop loss or bad harvest can leave the farm household in crisis for at least a few months. Secondly, pride prevents them from taking up lowly occupations or labouring elsewhere. Jobs, mostly unskilled, in the Persian Gulf were accorded preference if one fails to get employment in the government or in a steady income-earning job. Government employees were considered "better-off and secure". The local people viewed the life of a government employee as the most secure. Many wanted to see either themselves or their children placed in some position in the government.
- (d) *Secure/well-off*: The term *mechchapetta* was used to denote the secure/well-off. 'Secure/well-off' describes the few wealthy households, including traditionally rich families. They are presently farmers, skilled migrants, business people or in the government. Although many of the erstwhile landlords have declined in wealth, their descendants are still well-off relative to the wider community. A common practice among them is to keep the farmland fallow or lease it out to small farmers or agricultural labourers.

Although such a general categorization may not reveal why *a particular household* is poor or not, as standard participatory methods like wealth ranking do, it is nevertheless indicative. Figure 1 illustrates the core criterion of poverty in the village and the different categories.

In addition to the core criterion — namely, means of livelihood — local people identified certain 'vulnerability indicators'. The presence of one or more of these indicators, they said, will make a poor household more poor and precarious. The vulnerability indicators identified thus are:

- (a) only one income earner,
- (b) man unable to work,
- (c) headed by female,
- (d) dilapidated/badly constructed house,
- (e) has had marriage(s) in the recent past or has girl(s) of 'marriageable age',
- (f) has children pursuing higher education,
- (g) has not taken farmland on lease in the recent past, and,
- (h) living on the paddy field.

We assigned weights to each of these indicators, through a process of triangulation of evidence collected during fieldwork, as mentioned in the previous

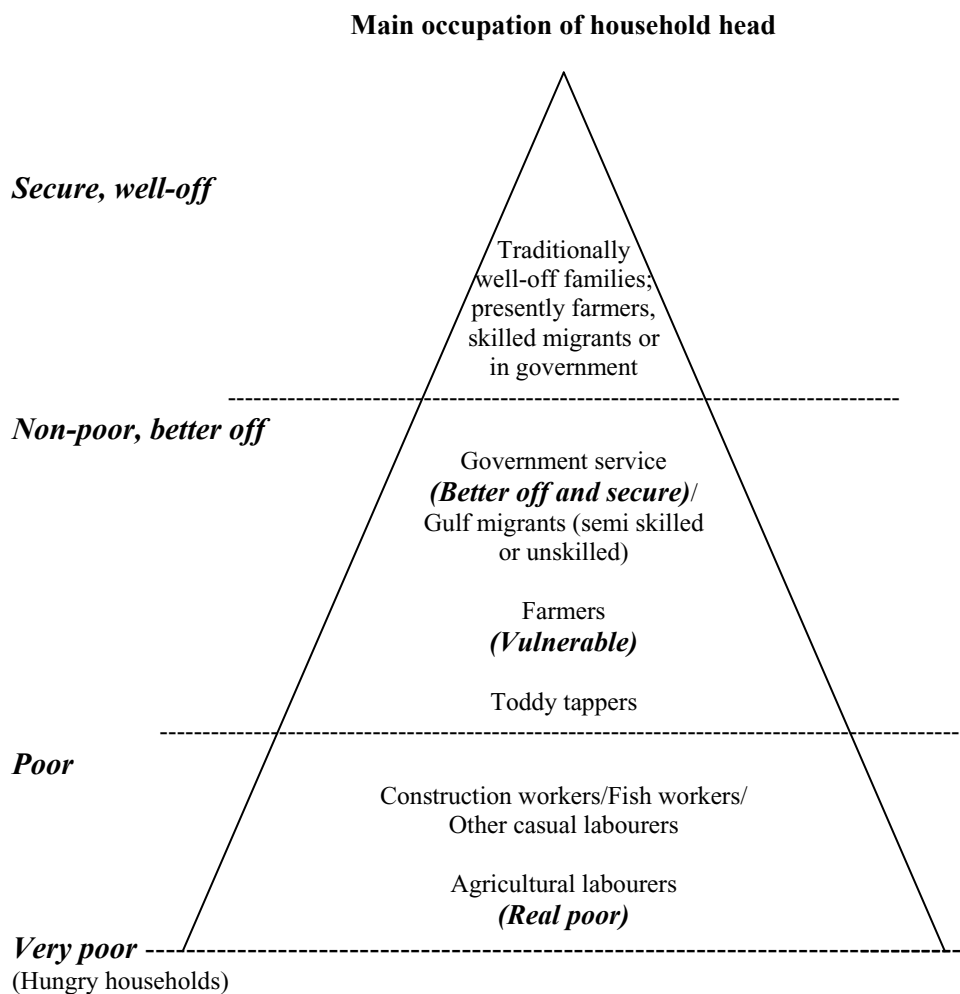


FIGURE 1. Core criterion of 'local' poverty.
Source: Based on field study, 2004–2005.

section. As marriage, illness and poor housing were mentioned as prominent factors in ill-being, we decided to give more weight to indicators related to them. Although expenditure on higher education was considered an equally severe burden on the household, we assigned less weight to it, since it is an investment for the future. Not having taken farmland on lease and having to live on the paddy field were cited as indicators of ill-being, although much less significantly. So, we assigned a low weight to them. The composite of the points of each indicator gives the 'vulnerability score' of a poor household, which we used to rank the households. The higher the score, the higher the vulnerability of a household. It must be mentioned here that the process of assigning weights was done at the 'expert' (here, the researchers) level and

Table 1. Local method to identify poor households

Level I: core criterion —to categorize <i>all</i> households	Primary occupation of the household head	
Level II: vulnerability indicators — to score and rank <i>poor</i> households	Has only one income earner	(0, 1) (no, yes)
	Man unable to work	(0, 1) (no, yes)
	Headed by female	(0, 1, 2) (no, yes, ill female)
	Has dilapidated/badly constructed house	(0, 1, 2) (good, bad, very bad)
	Has had marriage(s) in recent past or has girl(s) of marriageable age	(0, 1, 2, 3, ...) (none, one, two, three...)
	Has children pursuing higher education	(0, 0.5, 1, 1.5, 2, ...) (none, one, two, three, ...)
	Has taken farmland on lease in the recent past	(0, 0.5) (yes, no)
	Lives on the paddy field	(0, 0.5) (no, yes)

Source: Based on field study, 2004–2005.

did not involve the villagers. As such our approach could be termed, as we noted before, a *basic* participatory numbers approach.

The local method to identify a poor household is summarized in Table 1.

Application and comparison of the different methods to identify poor households

Among the 100 households in our sample, there were 63 poor households, 34 non-poor households and three well-off households according to the local method. We shall now take a look at how the BPL method and the Kerala method identify poor households *vis-à-vis* the local method.

Local method vis-à-vis the BPL method

The higher the BPL score, the better off the household - and *vice versa*. In the lower end of the BPL, between BPL scores 16 and 27, there are 26 poor households and no non-poor households according to the local method. In the upper end of the BPL, between BPL scores 38 and 46, there are 21 households non-poor according to the local method, including the three well-off households, but no poor households (see Table 2). This shows that the BPL method identifies those households that are really better-off and really worse-off, according to the local method. However, there are 53 households between BPL scores 28 and 37. The degree of convergence or divergence in this category is indeterminable due to limited comparability between the two methods, resulting from the fact that the BPL method does not have a pre-determined poverty cut-off. Table 2 presents a cross-tabulation of these households.

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Table 2. Local method *vis-à-vis* the BPL method

BPL score	Local category		Total
	Poor	Non-poor	
0-15	0	0	0
16-27	26	0	26
28	7	1	8
29	5	0	5
30	7	2	9
31	5	1	6
32	3	1	4
33	3	0	3
34	3	3	6
35	1	2	3
36	1	3	4
37	2	3	5
38-46	0	21	21
47-52	0	0	0
Total	63	37	100

Source: Computed from field study, 2004-2005.

The higher the vulnerability score, the more precarious is a poor household using the local method. The lower the BPL score, the worse-off is a household according to the BPL method. Taking the 63 poor households according to the local method, we find a negative correlation between vulnerability scores and BPL scores ($r = -0.58$, $p < 0.01$). This suggests that a household classified as poor in the local method would be classified so in the BPL method as well, showing high convergence between the two methods.

The results, in general, point to a convergence between the BPL and the local methods in identifying poor households. Both the methods screen for the households at the extremes (the really better-off and the really worse-off) in a similar fashion. Furthermore, we also found a similar pattern in classifying poor households using the local vulnerability scores and the BPL scores.

Local method vis-à-vis the Kerala method

Both the Kerala method and local method do not find a very poor household in the village. The Kerala method does not have a categorization among the non-poor, whereas the local method divides them into better-off and well-off and places three households in the latter category.

The Kerala method and the local method diverge greatly in dividing the households between poor and non-poor. While the former finds only 28 poor and 72 non-poor households in the sample, the latter does almost the opposite — finding 63 poor and 37 non-poor. Furthermore, one non-poor household in the local method is classified as poor in the Kerala method (see Table 3). However, we also find that high vulnerability scores are associated with being

Table 3. Local method *vis-à-vis* the Kerala method

Local method		Kerala method		Total
		Poor	Non-poor	
Non-poor	1	36	37	
Poor (vulnerability score)	0.0	0	9	9
	0.5	2	4	6
	1.0	1	9	10
	1.5	3	7	10
	2.0	2	3	5
	2.5	6	3	9
	3.0	3	0	3
	3.5	3	1	4
	4.0	2	0	2
	4.5	1	0	1
	5.0	3	0	3
	5.5	1	0	1
Total		28	72	100

Source: Computed from field study, 2004–2005.

categorized as poor in the Kerala method as well. A cross-tabulation between vulnerability scores of the 63 poor households in the local method and the categorization according to the Kerala method is also shown in Table 3.

The results suggest a mix of divergence as well as convergence between the Kerala and the local methods in identifying poor households. The Kerala method found fewer poor in the village than the local method. However, the vulnerable among the poor as identified by the local method have been classified as poor in the Kerala method as well, pointing to some overlap.

Cases of convergence and divergence

In this section, we will take up two specific cases each of convergence and divergence between the BPL, Kerala and local methods in identifying poor households.

Convergence

The poorest households. Except for slight differences in ranking, the BPL and the Kerala methods identify poorest households similar to the local method. We will illustrate this taking the case of Households A and B.

Household A with vulnerability score of 5.5 is the poorest household in the village according to the local method. The Kerala method also considers this household as poor. This household has a BPL score of 20, which places it in fourth position among the poorest according to the BPL method. However, Household B is the poorest according to the BPL method, with a

score of 16. This household has a vulnerability score of 4.5. The Kerala method considers it poor. Apart from this household, two households with scores 18 and 19 fall below and another with score 20 equals Household A in the BPL method.

Households A and B both are agricultural labour households, with no farm land and living in shabby huts, with minimum physical amenities. The heads of both households have been ill for sometime and working irregularly. However, Household A has two children, including a daughter of marriageable age, studying for a professional nursing diploma, whereas Household B has only younger children still in school. Household A has taken a hefty education loan from the bank, for which a local non-governmental organization has acted as liaison and support.³

The presence of a girl of marriageable age children and two children pursuing higher education makes Household A more vulnerable in the perception of the local people. On the other hand, a high literacy status (indicator seven), borrowing from institutional sources (indicator 11) and migration for purposes other than livelihood (indicator 12) together contribute four points more in the BPL method for this household compared to Household B.

The richest households. Three households in our sample have each a BPL score of 46. These are the secure and well-off households according to the local method. The Kerala method also classifies them as non-poor. These are not the richest households in the village, but fit perfectly well in the highest category using the local method. All are Syrian Christian households, traditionally farmers, but of late leasing out the land since agriculture is not profitable enough. Two households have educated and skilled migrants in the Persian Gulf, and in the third household the head as well as his wife have retired from the government and invested in small businesses.

Divergence

A notable deviation. Household C is the only non-poor household according to the local method classified as poor by the Kerala method. It has a BPL score of 38. The occupation of the head of the household, a medium-scale farmer, places it among the non-poor according to the local method. However, the presence of four factors — namely, living on the paddy field, having a child below five years, absence of toilet and lack of access to safe drinking water — makes it poor using the Kerala method. The high education of the wife of the household head, up to the bachelor's level, contributes among other factors to the high BPL score.

Gender. Local people tend to give more importance to gender than the official approaches. Of the eight vulnerability indicators listed for poor households, three (man unable to work, headed by female, and marriage) concern the relative burden of women. The Kerala method, on the other hand,

accords lesser significance to it, with no gender-related indicator among the nine risk factors and three among the contextual factors. Apart from giving some weight to female labour (indicator eight), the BPL method attributes no priority to gender differences.

During our discussions many people described having a girl in the household as a 'life long burden'. The household has to start saving money and assets years before marriage. Yet, marriage and payment of dowry leaves it in debt for a few years, in addition to taking away a chunk of their assets. Also 'the burden' does not end with marriage. The woman's household has to bear the expenses of the delivery of the children as well as the traditional ceremonies associated with it, which differs across religions and castes.

Discussion

This section discusses the conceptual issues raised by the study and provides a comparative assessment of the three methods.

Conceptualizing poverty as livelihood insecurity

The study shows that the local people conceptualize poverty in terms of livelihood insecurity. Other earlier research has also emphasized that insecurity forms a key element in creating and perpetuating poverty (World Bank, 2000). In fact, livelihood insecurity has been recognized as a central theme in poverty research and rural development during recent times (Devereux, 2001). Our study reaffirms this point.

What is striking, however, is that the local people associate different levels of in/security with different occupations. As such, some occupations are exclusively categorized as insecure and hence poor. A number of indicators of vulnerability have also been pointed out, indicating the limited ability of poor people to face stresses and shocks.

The results suggest that poor households in the region need not necessarily be unemployed, but 'insecurely employed'. Illness, for example, can leave an agricultural labour household without income for a while, even while there exists an opportunity to work. The non-poor, on the other hand, are 'normally' not poor, but vulnerable. Crop loss, for example, can leave a farmer household in transient poverty (Hulme, 2003). As such, a peon's (lowest-level government employee) job is more secure than an agricultural labourer's or a small farmer's, although a peon in Kerala obtains a monthly income less than, on average, a farmer (Kerala Sastra Sahitya Parishad, 2006, p. 65). The peon obtains periodic hikes, but never a slash, in salary — and upon retirement, receives a pension. The government takes care, partly, of the health risk. Moreover, in the eventuality of death during service, the closest family member is entitled to receive a job in the government. In the case of an agricultural labourer and a farmer, we see that the former invests less and earns less whereas the latter invests more, but runs the risk of losing

more. However, for both, the security of their livelihood depends on the success of the crop, which is unpredictable. Depending on their respective capabilities and assets, a peon, a farmer and an agricultural labour could all prepare for a foreseeable stress (marriage or education expense), but the probability of a peon's household surviving an unforeseeable shock (illness or death) is greater than that of the other two.

The key point is that whereas poor people lack the ability to cope with crisis, vulnerable non-poor people have limited resilience to adversities. This is what ultimately makes the difference in their lives. Poverty reduction must, hence, go beyond ensuring food security and providing a means of living. It must aim at enhancing the capacity of poor and vulnerable households to cope with and recover from shocks and stresses.

A comparative assessment of the three methods

The BPL method emphasizes basic needs (food, clothing, housing and sanitation), assets (land, consumer durables and debt), capabilities (literacy and school attendance of children) and livelihood (labour status, means of livelihood and migration). However, the approach is top-down, with experts choosing the indicators and weights, with no involvement of the lay people or the target group. The BPL method assigns equal weight to the 13 indicators relative to the other and progressive weight to severity within each indicator, thus arriving at a final single score for the household.

The Kerala method, in addition to basic needs (food, water, housing and sanitation) and capabilities (literacy), emphasizes socio-cultural (caste) and local factors. The Kerala method takes a bottom-up approach, through Participatory Poverty Assessments, involving the target groups. However, even while the local communities were consulted during the design of the method to select the indicators, they were not involved in the process of assigning weights. The Kerala method attributes equal weight to the different indicators, relative to the other as well as for severity within each, to screen-off the non-poor households.

The local method emphasizes one predominant dimension of poverty — namely, livelihood insecurity — and assigns relative importance to different means of livelihood. It identifies a number of vulnerability indicators for poverty and, through differential weighting, stresses the severity of each indicator relative to the other. Although it was eventually the researchers who assigned the weights to the indicators, the process involved triangulation of evidence gathered from a number of local sources. The approach was open-ended and bottom-up, in line with the participatory tradition, resulting in quantifiable indicators. Methodologically, we have adopted a *basic* participatory numbers approach.

Table 4 summarizes a comparative assessment of the three methods.

Revisiting the results, we see a general convergence of the BPL and the Kerala methods with the local method. In addition to the operational issues such as choice of dimensions and weighting, we could attribute the results

Table 4. A comparative assessment

	BPL method	Kerala method	Local method
Developed by	Experts	Experts and non-governmental organizations (as Participatory Poverty Assessment facilitators) in consultation with local people	Researchers (as Participatory Poverty Assessment facilitators) in consultation with local people
Level	Macro	Meso	Micro
Actors	Government of India	Government of Kerala	Local people
Approach	Multidimensional: combination of basic needs, assets, capabilities and livelihood	Multidimensional: combination of basic needs, capabilities, social exclusion and adaptable local/contextual factors	Multidimensional: one predominant dimension of poverty (livelihood insecurity), but many dimensions of vulnerability inside poverty
Weighting system	No "local" involvement: equal weight relative to other indicators and each indicator	No "local" involvement: equal weight relative to other indicators and to severity within each indicator	Partial 'local' involvement: prioritizations on core poverty criterion, differential weight to vulnerability indicators
Intended universality	High (national)	Medium (regional)	Low (local)
Objectivity	High	High	High
Poverty line	No	Yes	Yes
Unit of analysis	Household	Household	Household
Time-frame	Current picture	Current picture	Past, current and future events (e.g. marriage)

Source: Authors' compilation.

to two conceptual factors. Firstly, the BPL method, similar to the local method, draws largely from the livelihoods framework. Three indicators in the latter — namely, labour status, means of livelihood and migration — relate directly to livelihood and are assigned progressive weight just as the former. This could presumably be intuitive based on expert knowledge created through familiarity with poverty research in India and elsewhere. Secondly, the local method treats poverty and vulnerability as two interrelated but overlapping concepts (Dercon, 2005, p. 25). It implies that people who are non-poor can be vulnerable too. Farmers have been pointed out as the vulnerable non-poor in the local method, whereas a host of indicators account for the vulnerability among the poor. Although the BPL and the Kerala methods do not make a distinction between poverty and vulnerability, many of the vulnerability indicators that the local method uses are similar to what the Kerala method also applies to identify poor households. Hence, the households that are vulnerable poor according to the local method are identified, in general, as poor in the Kerala method as well.

While multidimensional poverty is definitely a conceptual improvement over income poverty, its operationalization across contexts has been limited at present to the Human Development Index. The Human Development Index centres on just three dimensions — namely, income, longevity and education — and does not account for other dimensions that might be of importance to lay and poor people. However, incorporating such dimensions will constrain comparability across contexts and will have limited policy applicability at the macro-level. The ongoing research on ‘missing dimensions’ of poverty (Alkire, 2007) could provide some directions in breaking this trade-off.

The primary objective of this study, as we noted at the outset, was not to devise a method, but to compare and contrast the views on poverty of academics and policy-makers and of poor people. The ‘method’, in fact, evolved during the course of the study, and we saw it as an appropriate mechanism to facilitate numerical comparison with the existing methods of the national and the state governments. As such, it was a means to an end, rather than the end itself. Thus, the key contribution of this study is not the development of a new method *per se*, but in illustrating, firstly, the conceptual point that local/contextual dimensions need to be taken into account while approaching poverty, and, secondly, the methodological point that relevant and useful ‘numbers’ (quantitative data) could be derived from ‘words’ (qualitative data). ‘Numbers’ facilitate comparison and are more appealing to the policy-makers.

Policy implications

The case study brought forth key contextual and cultural elements in poverty that have to be addressed to target poor households effectively. Comparable recent studies elsewhere have also taken a similar view (Krishna *et al.*, 2004).

Locally informed programmes and methods combine the 'life knowledge' (Kramer-Nevo, 2005) of the people who experience poverty and vulnerability in their lives with expert knowledge. The design of these programmes would involve close collaboration between researchers, non-governmental organizations and the local governments, in addition to popular participation. Experience has shown that participatory methods cost less compared with questionnaire surveys (Hulme, 2000, pp. 89–90, Krishna, 2004, p. 132). Local views and concerns can be effectively incorporated in policies and acted upon given the existence of strong decentralized governments. Improvement or deterioration over time could be tracked by periodic monitoring of the local indicators.

A key finding of this study is the uncertainty that looms over the lives of the lay people. The poor can be targeted once they are identified, but poverty can be reduced only when policies aim at its causes. Poverty reduction policies must help poor households to escape from poverty as well as protect the non-poor from falling into it. As Gaiha and Imai's (2004) empirical work shows, it is more difficult to identify the vulnerable among the non-poor, like the farmers in our case study, and protect them, than it is to target the poor.

Lay people do have their own coping mechanisms, such as borrowing or putting in extra labour, to provide for uncertain events. However, this often has negative consequences — such as borrowings leading to debt or additional labour leading to physical exhaustion. Two possible options for risk mitigation at the micro-level are, firstly, to strengthen group-based self-help initiatives and, secondly, to create effective insurance schemes. However, self-help initiatives such as collective farming or micro-credit have their limitations. For example, in the case of aggregate risks like a flood, common in our study area, the whole community will be unable to provide for itself. On the other hand, effective insurance schemes can cover idiosyncratic as well as aggregate risks to a large extent. As such, crop insurance should be provided for the farmers and health insurance for the labourers. The recent National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme is a firm step towards poverty reduction in India. However, it does not necessarily remove the uncertainties that rural households face. The National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme must be supplemented by effective risk mitigation strategies, like the ones we suggested above, to make the efforts at poverty reduction more meaningful.

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Notes

- 1 After a long legal battle concerning the results of the 2002 BPL census, the Government of India has decided not to proceed with its implementation; instead, a committee has been set up to propose the methodology for the next census (Karat, 2006).
- 2 Well known in the development literature for its unique development experience (Parayil, 2000; Drèze and Sen, 2002), Kerala has experienced considerable reduction in absolute poverty over the years - making conventional measures inappropriate to capture the well-being of its people, relative to the rest of India.
- 3 Even poor households in Kerala invest large amounts of money for higher education of their children, anticipating future returns. The directives of the government liberalizing the eligibility conditions have made the process of receiving loans easier. Many households in the study village had borrowed from banks as well as from informal sources for professional nursing education. The burgeoning demand for nurses in Europe, articulated well by popular media, as well as the visible economic success of migrant nurses, contribute to the perception of this investment being worthwhile.

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