ABSTRACT. The purpose of this article is to provide a fuller and more integrated understanding of poverty based on the results of a nation wide participatory study recently completed in South Africa. A surprisingly consistent view of poverty emerges from the study which includes social isolation, malnourished children, crowded homes, the use of basic energy sources, no employment, and fragmented households. A clear image of what results from extreme poverty also emerges comprising continuous ill health, arduous and often hazardous work for virtually no income, no power to influence change, and high levels of anxiety and stress. The article concludes that conventional definitions of poverty do not fully describe the experience of poverty as analysed by the poor themselves. Instead, the multidimensional nature of poverty suggests that three basic concepts would be useful in any analysis of extent, nature and persistence of poverty. These are sufficiency, access and vulnerability.

INTRODUCTION

Despite the relative wealth of South Africa in terms of the country’s per capita Gross Domestic Product, the experience of the majority of South African households is either one of outright poverty, or of continued vulnerability to becoming poor. Although, in common with many countries, this inability to satisfy essential needs stems from many sources, the specificity of poverty in South Africa has been the impact of apartheid. One aspect of this system was a process of active dispossession whereby assets, such as land and livestock, were stripped from the black majority, while simultaneously, opportunities to develop these assets, such as markets, infrastructure and education, were denied them. As such, apartheid, and the legislation through which this ideology was implemented, operated to both produce poverty and to compress social and economic class.

Measuring Poverty in Post-Apartheid South Africa

An adjunct of apartheid has been the absence of credible and comprehensive social indicator data which could assist in policy formu-
lation. As a starting point to address this, the Project for Statistics on Living Standards and Development (PSLSD) was undertaken in 1993 which provided a quantitative base-line survey. In 1995, this survey was following by a complementary qualitative research project.

The purpose of this study, referred to as the South African Participatory Poverty Assessment (SA-PPA) was to provide a fuller and more integrated understanding of poverty from the perspective of those who are poor and to fill the gaps which the quantitative study could not readily explain. In particular, the multi-dimensional experience of being poor, and the perceptions of “the poor” towards the causes and relief of their poverty could not be assessed.

Eventually, the SA-PPA included fifteen linked studies and involved some 45 researchers from 20 organisations. In addition, the SA-PPA covered sites in all provinces of South Africa with the exceptions of Gauteng and the Free State. Work was undertaken with 25 communities, 10 of which were located in KwaZulu-Natal, 7 in the Eastern Cape and 4 in the Northern Province. Judging the number of participants in the studies is difficult, since a large group does not necessarily imply that all who attended the workshops and meetings actually participated. Nonetheless a rough estimate suggests that about 1400 people were included in the SA-PPA.

This article discusses findings from the SA-PPA which show the experiences of the poor themselves and the indicators by which they perceive and evaluate their lives. The emphasis placed on Participatory Appraisal methodologies allows for a discussion of social indicators as analysed by communities and individuals, and provided new insight into the measurement of poverty as seen by the poor.

Participatory Appraisal Methodologies

The most commonly used research methodologies in the SA-PPA were explicitly based on Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA). These methodologies draw on various traditions of research including applied anthropology, Participatory Action Research, Rapid Rural Appraisal and agro-ecosystems analysis. Although the origins of the methodologies are predominantly rural, and generally related to participatory planning of natural resource management, they are