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The Context of Poverty

This is a study of the aspirations, roles, actions and effectiveness of European development agencies in trying to improve the lot of the poor. Yet inevitably the main determinants of the possibilities and chances of succeeding rest with the specific partner country – the nature of its poverty, its culture, its politics and government attitudes, policies and capacities. It is appropriate therefore to begin with a brief review of the poverty situation in the seven poor or relatively poor countries which form the focus of this study. Although these seven countries are not necessarily representative of the poverty context in the developing world as a whole, they do cover three continents: India and Nepal in Asia, Burkina Faso, Tanzania, Zambia and Zimbabwe in Africa, and Bolivia in Latin America. The types of problems and opportunities posed are reasonably typical of many of the other country contexts in which the European agencies work.

At the core of poverty is material deprivation, low income and consumption levels leading to poor food and nutritional status, inadequate clothing and housing and sub-standard access to health and schooling. Vulnerability and the resultant insecurity are further characteristics. Poverty also has important non-material aspects, including dependence arising from unequal relationships and social exclusion. The poor are also somewhat heterogeneous. The study as a whole has used a multidimensional conceptualization of poverty, which complements analyses based on income and consumption with assessments of livelihood, including vulnerability, access to resources, levels of knowledge and rights. A brief analytical review of the nature and dimensions of poverty prepared by Tony Killick is set out in Annex 1.
To set the scene for the aims and operations of the external agencies, four major aspects of the conditions in these countries are briefly explored.

- the nature of their poverty and hence the basic challenge posed to reduce poverty levels in the next 20 years;
- current attitudes towards the poor and the policies for poverty reduction of the government authorities;
- politics and the poor;
- decentralization processes and the poor.

Poverty situation

Table 1.1 provides statistical indicators of some of the multiple dimensions of poverty in the seven countries under review here. It shows that the case study countries, apart from Bolivia, have very low rankings in terms of human development, with all falling in the bottom 65 countries out of 175, and Burkina Faso (at 172), Nepal (at 154), Tanzania (at 149), Zambia (at 143) within the bottom 25. The very poorest in per capita income terms measured in purchasing power parity were Tanzania, Burkina Faso and Zambia, followed by Nepal, India, Zimbabwe and Bolivia.

Access to resources, such as health care, education, clean drinking water and sanitation, was inadequate or non-existent for significant sections of the population. The health, water and sanitation, and nutrition section of Table 1.1 shows Burkina Faso and Zambia to have particularly poor indicators. Malnutrition is most severe in Nepal, where it affects a staggering 70 per cent of all children under five, and also in India, where over half of all children are affected, falling to 16 per cent in Zimbabwe. Access to education services is a further dimension of poverty. Education standards, assessed in terms of literacy, are particularly low in Burkina Faso and Nepal, where 81 and 73 per cent, respectively, of the population are illiterate. In every case women and girls are particularly discriminated against, with about 90 per cent of women being illiterate in Burkina Faso and Nepal and 60 per cent in India.

The proportion of people below the specified absolute (income) poverty line is high (over 40 per cent) in most of these countries, and only somewhat lower in India (35 per cent), and Zimbabwe