

Holistic approaches to poverty reduction: where does agricultural research fit in?

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Abstract

This paper examines the concept of poverty and briefly details past and new approaches to poverty reduction, with an emphasis on agricultural research. Its focus is on holistic, 'livelihoods' approaches to poverty reduction, that are people centred and multi-sectoral. It concludes that in order to be an effective tool for poverty reduction agricultural research will have to expand its horizons – changing both the way in which it views poverty (taking a wider and more disaggregated view) and its working practices. Greater collaboration with other sectors and disciplines is particularly important. The paper addresses issues that are relevant to both donors and domestic governments, though much of the evidence and thinking on which it draws come from the donor side.

Useful comments on the paper were provided by John Tarbit at DFID and John Farrington at ODI.

Introduction

About 70% of the world's poor live in rural areas. Though urban poverty is rising, the correlation between poverty and remoteness from urban centres is strong in most countries. It is expected to remain so until at least the second decade of the next century.

In order to be effective in eliminating rural poverty it is necessary to develop:

- a clear understanding of what (rural) poverty is and what its human-level manifestations are;
- a detailed view of the root causes of poverty in any particular rural area;
- a practical implementation strategy for efforts to reduce it (including, where agricultural research is concerned, a set of practical and relevant tools/technologies); and
- effective indicators to measure progress.

This schema is 'holistic'. It takes people and their interpretations of poverty as the starting point, seeking subsequently to identify and, where feasible, to address the major structural and institutional causes of their impoverishment. These are unlikely to fall into any neat category or sector. For those involved with agricultural research the challenge is to develop a critical understanding of the role that this research can play in improving people's livelihoods. This requires breadth of thought, an ability to recognise the limitations (and opportunities) of agricultural research as a tool to achieve poverty reduction

and a more proactive effort to develop links with those working on other aspects of poverty reduction.

1. What is poverty?

Poverty is a context-specific state. Processes of impoverishment are highly dynamic and definitions of poverty shift, not only from place to place but from individual to individual and over time. While all may agree that poverty is 'a lack', views of what exactly is lacking range to include: basic needs, income/consumption, assets (material and non-material), dignity/autonomy/ social inclusion, equality (gender and ethnicity) and political freedom/security (DAC 1999). Few are willing to prioritise between these. Opinions further diverge as to whether we should be considering relative deprivation in these areas or whether we can define an absolute cut-off point on every axis.

If defining poverty is difficult, understanding its various different root causes – a precondition if it is to be eliminated – is even more of a challenge. One of the complications here is that various *manifestations* of poverty (e.g. lack of access to assets, lack of political voice and influence) may simultaneously appear as *causes* of poverty (e.g. rural people may become poorer because they have no access to land). Vicious circles of decline often commence with one off shocks (e.g. a death in the family, a natural disaster, civil conflict and displacement) that disturb the tenuous equilibrium of already vulnerable households and communities. Because these people have nothing on which to 'fall back' – few assets, little political leverage, inadequate access to

services – they become successively more impoverished. It is far from easy to determine what are the proximate and underlying ‘causes’ of their poverty and how these should best be addressed.

This problem is compounded when an overly narrow view of poverty is taken. If an undue focus is placed upon money metric dimensions, this can reduce the scope of investigation into the causes of poverty. Thus, World Bank poverty assessments are criticised for omitting analysis of important subjects such as: politics and problems of governance, ethnicity, land reform and conservation policies, savings and investment, and others (Hanmer et al. 1998).

2. How has poverty been addressed?

Understandings of poverty have been broadening over time. However, even those who embrace a broad view of poverty have tended to follow a reasonably narrow strategy for its alleviation (DAC 1999). In most cases the emphasis has been placed upon economic growth (an increase in productive activity – agricultural research fits in here) with health/education and social safety nets as second and third ‘prongs’ of the approach. These three prongs have typically been addressed in isolation, rather than as an integrated whole. And activities intended to promote economic growth have – with the exception of the ill-fated integrated rural development projects of the 1970s and 80s¹ – tended to work in single sectors (agriculture, roads, etc.) or at a policy and structural level (civil service reform, budgetary support,

privatisation of state enterprises, etc.). A strong emphasis has been placed upon rationalising and improving the supply of goods and services to the poor while the task of maintaining social safety nets has often been left to NGOs and community organisations (though social funds have recently become more popular amongst larger donors).

In rural areas, investing in agriculture, and particularly agricultural technology, has long been viewed – at least by donors – as a means of simultaneously addressing both growth and equity issues (Ellis forthcoming). This emphasis has been primarily justified by the belief, backed up by many empirical studies, that the poor in rural areas are small farmers and that in such areas agriculture acts as the ‘engine of growth’ – and thus poverty reduction. In addition there are several studies that show that very few countries achieve poverty reduction without economic growth and that agricultural growth usually precedes more general economic growth. The importance to economic development and poverty reduction of maintaining *stable* agricultural prices has been particularly highlighted (FAO 1996, Timmer 1992).

Much effort has been invested in reforming the structures that provide services to rural people. Simultaneously, donors, in particular, have tried to change the working practices within agricultural technology organisations so that these become more focused on the needs of the poor. Considerable resources have been invested in trying to institutionalise participatory working methods and in building up farmers’ organisations so that these are better

able to become involved in the technology process. Lately the focus has also fallen on finding ways to draw private sector organisations more fully into national research efforts (Carney 1998).

International support has also been directed – with some notable success – towards strategic research on the main crops that are grown in developing countries. It is, however, an interesting reflection on the mindset of the major donors that arguments for sustained investment in international research are now being based on the idea of ‘doing well through doing good’. Studies show that investment in the CGIAR system can yield strong positive returns for developed countries as well as developing countries (Alston and Pardey 1997). Such findings raise inevitable questions about whether the maximum poverty reduction effect is being reaped from international research efforts.

3. What have been the shortcomings of development efforts to date?

The main shortcomings of development efforts to date have been:

- an unclear commitment to poverty eradication, leading to inadequate targeting of resources;
- an inadequate understanding of the livelihoods of the poor;
- a focus on inputs rather than outcomes for the poor;
- a lack of connection between micro and macro issues; and
- poor sustainability and a lack of strategic vision for poverty reduction efforts.

This section of the paper reviews these shortcomings, with a particular focus on agricultural research. The fact that the section focuses on shortcomings should not be taken to suggest that there have not also been successes. The proportion of rural people classified as living in poverty decreased in 41 countries between the mid-1960s and 1988. However, it increased in 23 countries and the absolute number of poor people continued to grow. If the DAC targets are to be achieved we need to take a very critical look at all development spending, constantly questioning whether we are satisfied with the returns and whether improvements can be made.

(i) Unclear commitment to poverty eradication

Poverty reduction has often been a hidden or non-explicit goal, especially for governments and foreign agencies that have focused on promoting economic growth in developing countries. For some donors there has been an assumption that working in poor countries is sufficient for targeting of the poor (DAC 1999, p.12). This has reduced the effectiveness (in poverty reduction terms) of development efforts (Burnside and Dollar 1996). While it is not suggested that all money should be spent directly on the poor (focused poverty reduction efforts), it is important to understand the extent to which more inclusive or enabling actions actually benefit the poor in the longer term – as opposed to all benefits being captured by richer people – and to prioritise scarce resources accordingly.²

Agricultural research: Early spending on agricultural research was intended primarily to boost production. If such research is successful, this can be an

effective strategy for poverty reduction, especially when prices fall and the poor are net consumers of food. However, successful research does not always lead to poverty reduction, especially when poor producers are price takers and are unable to capture the benefits of research as quickly as richer farmers. The key requirement is to understand the likely distribution of the benefits of research in both the short and long term. When the underlying rationale for conducting research is other than poverty reduction, this is seldom done. And even when distributional issues are considered, Cox et al. (1998) argue that it is difficult to ensure that the poor will *directly* capture the benefits of agricultural research (few crops are specific to the poor, the poor often do not have the resources to invest in new methods and relatively little progress has been made for the crops – e.g. roots, tubers, etc. – that form the staple diet of the poorest groups).

(ii) Inadequate understanding of livelihoods

Perhaps because of the unclear commitment to poverty reduction, inadequate effort has been devoted by those planning programmes of support (both donor and government) to understanding the reality of (rural) livelihoods. With a limited understanding of the nature of poor people's lives it has been difficult to identify the priorities for external intervention. It is common to see blanket categorisations of the poor (e.g. statements that female headed households or farmers are poor) acting as the basis for development interventions with little critical investigation of the underlying hypotheses. Likewise the links between different 'parts' of people's lives

have not been adequately explored, despite that fact that many poor people combine a complex and disparate range of activities in order to carve out their livelihoods (they may be producers at one point in the year, wage labourers or migrants at another, etc.). Similarly insufficient time and effort has been devoted to understanding how the poor view their own situation and what *their* priorities are. Yet unless we understand how livelihoods are constructed we are unlikely to be able to target spending effectively or to recognise the less obvious constraints to poverty reduction.

Agricultural research: Decision makers in agricultural research have not invested adequately in understanding the livelihoods of their clients and the factors that influence those livelihoods (such as market opportunities, national policies, access to assets, etc.). Because they seldom have an effective understanding of how the poor are expected to gain from research (directly as producers, indirectly as consumers or as labour – or perhaps all three over a particular time period) it is unlikely that they are targeting resources efficiently. Where investments have been made in understanding rural livelihoods, there has been a tendency to focus solely on agricultural activities within farming systems. This has artificially compartmentalised agriculture, rather than treating it as a shifting part of broader livelihood strategies. A notable concern is that scientists may have neglected the fact that many existing agriculturalists are actually seeking to leave agriculture. This has implications for whether they will invest in new technologies or working practices and hence for the returns to agricultural research.

(iii) Focus on inputs not outcomes

Poverty reduction is about achieving beneficial outcomes for the poor.

Unfortunately spending has often neglected outcomes in favour of a focus on inputs (a tendency that is reinforced by some project planning and monitoring systems) or on the resources and services that people use (forests, fisheries, roads, extension services, etc.). Although development planning has become generally more participatory, there remains a significant difference between resource- or organisational structure-centred spending and people-centred spending. Success in reforming structures and preserving resources does not automatically lead to beneficial outcomes for the poor, whose needs and use patterns may not have been adequately factored into the calculations.

Perhaps the most glaring example of this has been the effort invested in training and visit extension systems. A preoccupation with the development of what appeared to be rational structures diverted attention from the real needs of farmers. To a lesser extent this same pattern is being repeated in more recent sector investment spending. Despite the participatory rhetoric many programmes have a strong supply side (and often 'public sector only') bias (DFID/NEDA 1999).

Agricultural research: The preoccupation with structures is a common feature of agricultural research spending (particularly donor spending). Successive waves of money are invested in reorganising and rationalising research systems (and, more particularly, national agricultural research institutes).

While this may be an essential step in creating an environment that is

responsive to the needs of the poor, the focus of such programmes is often very internal and not sufficiently informed by user input and the need to increase this on a systemic basis. Another common failing of agricultural research has been that research results – even when they are useful – never ‘get out’ because the mandate of the research organisation ends with technology development (which is, in reality, just an intermediate step in a continuum that should lead to poverty reduction). While the goals of a research programme may be achieved, these often fail to contribute to poverty reduction because the research organisation has inadequate links with the private sector and others that might effectively commercialise or further develop the new ideas. Or, in more extreme circumstances, research may have neglected the needs of the market or final product users. Such research cannot be translated into outcomes that are beneficial to the poor because it does not meet relevant requirements.

(iv) Lack of connection between the micro and the macro

Development activity tends to take place either at the micro (project) level or at the macro level (on sector wide issues, public management and budgeting, policy support or civil service reform). While both types of activity may achieve success, opportunities for more far-reaching improvements in poverty indicators are lost when the two sides are not brought together. When lessons from micro activities are not incorporated into macro activities the effectiveness of these macro interventions is reduced. On the other side, those working at the micro level have stumbled when they have failed to take

into account the effect of macro level factors. This is especially apparent in some otherwise very effective localised NGO projects. For example NGOs may establish efficient systems of paraprofessional service delivery (paraveterinarians or informal credit systems) but later find that these are outlawed under national legislation and therefore collapse once the 'protection' of the founding NGO is removed.

Agricultural research: This latter problem afflicts agricultural research when, for example, promising investments in resource management technology are undermined by hostile (or changing) national land use legislation or contrary economic incentives. Unless agricultural researchers are adequately informed about conditioning macro factors and the effects of micro, meso and macro institutions and organisations on the livelihoods of the poor they risk engaging in long and costly projects that produce little of value. This is a particular problem for poverty targeted research as the poor – unlike multi-national agro-industrial firms – seldom have the ability or necessary influence to campaign for changes in policy or legislation in response to opportunities opened up by research.

(v) Poor sustainability and lack of strategic vision

The problem of unsustainable development spending and the creation, through such 'over intensive' spending, of unsustainable institutions and organisations is well known. The anecdotal evidence is compelling; it suggests that there has been significant wastage of resources over the years

as successive options have been tried out. In some cases the fault lies with poorly conceived projects and poorly functioning structures. In other cases projects are working most effectively but at a cost that cannot be sustained over the long term. The lessons that they are learning therefore prove useless to those in other areas that are trying to tackle similar problems. Recent efforts to bring the private sector and private sector principles more squarely into development activity may improve this situation, though they can have a negative impact upon poorer groups in the short-term.

Agricultural research: Despite efforts to refocus thinking on national agricultural research systems, as opposed to single institutes, there are few developing countries in which there is an overall strategic vision of the agricultural research environment (though the Latin American countries are significantly ahead in this regard). Such a vision would need to take into account the following key dimensions and find a balance between them:

- adaptive through to strategic research
- production focused to post-production and market-oriented research
- poverty-focused research to output-oriented research for commercial farmers; and
- natural resources management research to highly specific product research.

Problems of financial sustainability are particularly pressing for agricultural research, and especially research that focuses on alleviating poverty. In many developing countries research is moribund due to both an absolute lack of resources and very untimely disbursement of those resources that are

available. In others, the attention of senior management has been diverted by schemes to make money out of existing assets and research activities, often at the expense of poverty focused research. Recent efforts to improve the overall efficiency of research, for example through the establishment of competed research funds, may encourage investment in agricultural research (e.g. by the private sector) but there has been limited progress in this regard to date (Gill and Carney 1999).

4. What are the new ways of thinking about poverty?

Poverty has recently achieved a new prominence in the agenda of international development agencies. All donors sign up to the OECD DAC International Development Targets which include the reduction by half of people living in extreme poverty by the year 2015. Of the major governmental donors/ lenders only four (France, IMF, Portugal and USA) do not have poverty reduction as an overarching goal. By contrast, thirteen donors/lenders have poverty reduction as the sole overarching goal. For the remainder, poverty reduction is one of two or more overarching goals (DAC 1999).

The situation with domestic governments is much more varied, though many do claim a commitment to poverty reduction. Studies that have shown that the aid effectiveness is positively correlated with the extent to which recipient governments are implementing 'good' macro economic policies. Drawing on these findings, a number of donors have stated their desire to work with only

`like minded' governments and to develop more meaningful partnerships with such governments. For example the UK Government White Paper on International Development states that the UK will `pursue [the international development targets] with poorer countries who are also committed to them' (DFID 1997, p.6). This holds out the prospects that donors and certain domestic governments will move forward together in their thinking about poverty.

The new (donor) emphasis on poverty has spawned a renewed effort to define and understand this state. Mostly this has entailed taking a broader view of poverty, recognising its social as well as economic dimensions and acknowledging the plight of those who are `socially excluded', multiply disadvantaged and unable to find an entry point back into the mainstream. Broader views of poverty have also placed a greater emphasis on vulnerability as a state that both precedes and accompanies poverty, though money metric and economic views of poverty continue to dominate at an operational level (Hanmer et al. 1998).³

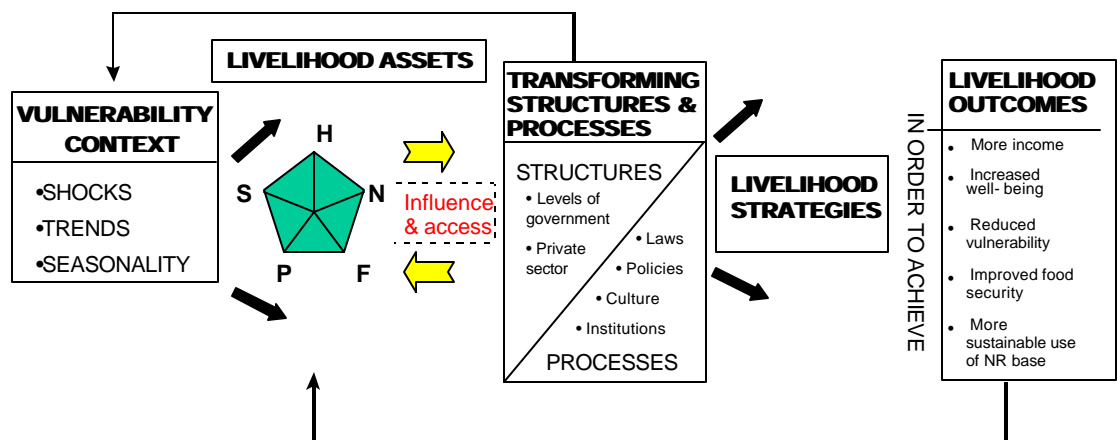
Some agencies (e.g. the UK Department for International Development, UNDP, Oxfam, Care, etc.) have moved farther than others towards defining and operationalising holistic approaches to poverty reduction. These holistic notions try to capture, and provide a means of understanding, the vital causes and dimensions of poverty without collapsing the focus onto just a few factors (e.g. economic issues, food security, etc.). They also try to sketch out the relationships between the different aspects (causes, manifestations)

of poverty, allowing for more effective prioritisation of action at an operational level. They are underpinned by a small number of key principles, namely those of:

- maintaining a focus on people and building upon their strengths;
- taking a holistic and dynamic approach;
- emphasising the importance of sustainability while recognising the existence of conflict and trade-offs; and
- stressing the importance of micro-macro links.

The 'livelihoods' framework presented in figure 1 is one tool that can be used as a practical starting point for the operationalisation of a holistic approach to poverty reduction. This framework was developed by and is in use within the UK Department for International Development. In effect it offers a schema for bringing together the disparate strands of the discussion about poverty.

Figure 1: DFID's Sustainable Livelihoods framework



Where:

- H** represents **human capital**: the skills, knowledge, ability to labour and good health important to the ability to pursue different livelihood strategies;
- P** represents **physical capital**: the basic infrastructure (transport, shelter, water, energy and communications) and the production equipment and means which enable people to pursue livelihoods;
- S** represents **social capital**: the social resources (networks, membership of groups, relationships of trust, access to wider institutions of society) upon which people draw in pursuit of livelihoods;
- F** represents **financial capital**: the financial resources which are available to people (whether savings, supplies of credit or regular remittances or pensions) and which provide them with different livelihood options;
- N** represents **natural capital**: the natural resource stocks from which resource flows useful for livelihoods are derived (e.g. land, water, wildlife, biodiversity, environmental resources)

The framework encourages users to think about existing livelihood patterns as a basis for planning development activities and spending. This entails analysis – using various existing tools such as social and stakeholder analysis, economic and rapid appraisal methods, etc. – of:

- the context in which (different groups of) people live, including the effects upon them of external trends (economic, technological, population growth etc.), shocks (whether natural or manmade) and seasonality;

- people's access to different types of assets (physical, human, financial, natural and social) and their ability to put these to productive use;
- the institutions, policies and organisations which shape their livelihoods; and
- the different strategies that they adopt in pursuit of their goals.

The value of a framework such as this is that it encourages users to take a broad and systematic view of the factors that cause poverty – whether these are shocks and adverse trends, poorly functioning institutions and policies or a basic lack of assets – and to investigate the relations between them. It does not take a 'sectoral' view of poverty, but tries to recognise the contribution made by all the sectors to building up the stocks of assets upon which people draw to sustain their livelihoods.⁴ The aim is to do away with pre-conceptions about what exactly people seek and how they are most likely to achieve their goals and to develop an accurate and dynamic picture of how different groups of people operate within their environment. This provides the basis for the identification of constraints to livelihood development and poverty reduction. Such constraints can lie at local level or in the broader economic and policy environment. They may relate to the agricultural sector – long the focus of donor activity in rural areas – or they may be more to do with social conditions, health, education or rural infrastructure.

This framework avoids laying down any explicit definition of what exactly poverty is.⁵ The 'outcomes' in the right hand box are 'suggestions' of the type of objectives that people may be pursuing, but the 'real' meaning of

poverty remains context-specific, something to be investigated on a case by case basis with different groups.

Rural poverty

Rural people are not only isolated from economic opportunities. They also tend to be less able than their urban counterparts to access the services, such as health, sanitation and education, that would enable them to increase their sense of well-being and reduce the non-economic dimensions of their poverty (and the economic dimensions in the longer term). For example, it is estimated that around 1 billion rural households in developing countries lack access to safe water supplies (UNCHS 1996). Moreover, knowledge of rights and information about the way that governments function is notably lacking in rural areas. This makes it hard for rural people to exert pressure for change in systems that have often actively discriminated against them both in the allocation of resources and in pricing policies for rural produce.

In their recognition of the complexity of rural areas, the new approaches open up the agenda for external support, widening the scope of rural development activity. They de-link the concepts 'rural' and 'agricultural' and attempt to base their activities on a more accurate picture of the constraints and opportunities faced by the poor in rural communities. They take the view that sustainable poverty reduction will be achieved only if external support works with people in a way that is congruent with their current livelihood strategies and ability to adapt.

Key strengths are that:

- They project a far more realistic and complete picture of rural life and rural poverty, thus making way for better targeted poverty reducing interventions. Several recent studies have revealed the enormous diversity of rural life, showing that most rural households rely on multiple income sources and adopt a range of different strategies (including various types of migration and straddling, whereby some members stay in rural areas while others live semi-permanently in urban areas) in order to survive (see Ellis, forthcoming, for a good review of these studies). It is hardly surprising then, that past rural development policies which focused almost entirely on natural resources and their use have failed to maximise opportunities in rural areas.
- They recognise the importance of multiple actors in rural areas (from the private sector to national level ministries, from community based organisations to newly emerging decentralised government bodies) thereby widening the range of potential partners in rural development.
- They make a serious effort to understand the national and international linkages of rural areas and the effect these have on people's livelihoods. In the past, the physical isolation and poverty of rural areas has tempted people to think that these linkages were of little relevance. By contrast, the new approaches emphasize the importance of macro level policy and institutions to the livelihood options of communities and individuals,

including the very poorest. They also stress the need for higher level policy formulation to be based upon insights gained at the local level.

- They emphasize the multi-faceted notion of sustainability. In rural areas the concept of sustainability is often associated with natural resources. This type of sustainability is clearly important as it provides the basis for livelihoods of the future. However, it is not the only aspect of sustainability which is important. Livelihoods approaches have learnt from participatory poverty assessments that vulnerability is a core dimension of poverty. Reducing vulnerability - helping people to develop resilience to external shocks and stresses and increase the overall sustainability of their livelihoods - is therefore a priority.

5. What do 'holistic approaches' mean for agricultural research?

These evolving approach to poverty reduction have certain key implications for agricultural research. In particular they suggest a need to:

- Build research upon a broader, more dynamic and more realistic notion of poverty with people at the centre.** This implies that those who control resources should ensure that adequate sums are invested in understanding the many dimensions of livelihoods. Amongst other things this will entail developing an understanding of how and why different groups of people are expected to gain from research and using this to guide poverty-focused research activity. This does not

entail abandoning economic and production oriented criteria in research decision-making but it does entail recognising their limitations and moving beyond them. The livelihoods framework can be useful here as it suggests a way of thinking through the various asset categories, institutional and contextual factors that influence people's ability to make use of research. (Research itself can be thought of as contributing to human capital – the skills and knowledge that are essential for effective exploitation of resources. This human capital can only be effectively used when those who have it have sufficient access to other assets and when they exist in a conducive institutional, organisational and economic environment).

- ii. **Invest more in understanding when agricultural research is likely to be an effective tool in poverty elimination.** There are two dimensions to this problem. The first is that we need to get better at predicting when research will be successful both in its own right and as a means of triggering other types of positive change and innovation. While there are plenty of statistics showing the positive returns to agricultural research, there is also much room for improvement. Critics of research do not have to look far to find failed efforts. Yet, to date, relatively little has been invested in understanding why those projects/programmes that fail do so and what needs to change to avoid repeated failure. Being more open about problems and more willing to learn from them may well gain many friends for agricultural research. The second dimension of the problem is

perhaps more complex. It relates to the need to treat research not as an end in itself but as *one way* of building human capacity to achieve better livelihoods: sometimes it will be a priority, sometimes not. There is therefore a need to develop better systems for determining when providing support to agricultural research – most of which remains directed at increasing productivity – is the most effective use of public money. ⁶

- iii. **Ensure that indicators of success are negotiated with people so they genuinely reflect progress in achieving positive outcomes for the poor.** This in turn will help feed back into the learning process noted in (ii) above. Since people are concerned with final impact, this is likely to mean that various types of development activity (research, the establishment of social funds, etc.) are working to achieve the same goals. This can be a powerful stimulant to the type of joint working proposed in (iv) below.

- iv. **Link research more closely to other types of support activity, especially to efforts to develop an institutional environment that increases people's choice when making livelihood decisions.**

One very successful way of doing this is through the development of well-regulated and open markets for goods and services. However, markets do not provide all solutions. Infrastructure, for example, remains largely a public sector responsibility and social capital is not something that can be 'traded' through the market-place (though it

can and does make market transactions more efficient by reducing transactions costs). This 'requirement' spells the need for researchers proactively to develop new relationships with new partners beyond the research community to ensure that the intended beneficiaries of research are actually in a position to make best use of it.

- v. **Pay more attention to the impact of 'external'/macro level factors on the benefits of research.** This is a sufficiently important point to merit being highlighted on its own. However, it is really a link point between (ii) (the need to understand why research fails and to 'get better' at doing the job) and (iv) (the need to link with other types of support activity, including institution building and policy reform efforts). Again it requires a refocusing of effort and a more outward looking stance in research. Sometimes researchers will need to alter their programmes to take into account macro/external factors. In other cases their work may actually be able to stimulate change in these factors. This may be especially true in the case of local institutions for resource management. However, stimulating such change will once again require the development of new skills (including in conflict resolution) and partnerships.

Needless to say, these new 'requirements' for research throw up a whole new range of challenges for agricultural research and research decision-makers. For example, experience has already shown the difficulty of adopting inter-disciplinary working practices, yet now we are asking for a more cross-

sectoral viewpoint to infuse research work. At the extreme the new approaches would ask researchers to count themselves out of work when research does not appear to be a priority (assuming this conclusion is based upon sound reasoning). However, it is unlikely that this extreme would be reached. There remain strong arguments for continued funding of agricultural research at both a strategic and an adaptive level – even when analysis shows research not to be an *immediate* priority for poor – in order to maintain a resource and a stream of knowledge for the future. There are, though, likely to be implications for the type of research conducted. Decisions about this should be informed both by an understanding of livelihoods – especially the producer/consumer divide – and an understanding of what others involved in development and poverty reduction are doing.

Finally, although the challenges are great, the new ideas provide a unique opportunity for research to evolve in a positive way. Present opinions on agricultural research tend to be highly polarised. Some who are concerned with ‘social’ issues, safety nets and sectors such as health and education discount the contribution that research can make to poverty reduction. They view research as overly technocratic and unsophisticated in its understanding of the drivers and manifestations of poverty. Others criticise agricultural research for being too ‘public’, something that they view as out of place in a sector of the economy that is essentially private in nature. Supporters, on the other hand, may be prone to point to some of the undeniable successes of agricultural research and rest on their laurels.

The new, holistic ideas about development and poverty reduction embrace the market yet acknowledge the heterogeneity and multiple dimensions of poverty. They offer a way forward for research decision makers to show how their activity contributes to the whole. If the successes of research are so great, this should be easy. But if research fails to embrace the new ideas and approaches – critically yet with a positive mind – it is likely to become further marginalised in the poverty reduction effort and all sides will lose.

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¹ The only significant attempt to move beyond the sectoral approach to poverty reduction was in the integrated rural development programmes of the 1970s-80s. These were plagued with problems. Amongst other things they were over-ambitious in their scope, trying to achieve unrealistic levels of inter-ministerial coordination through the establishment of separate/parallel project offices. They were also bound to operate in an extremely adverse economic environment.

² Enabling actions are those which support the policies and context for poverty reduction and elimination. Inclusive actions - e.g. education programmes – are broad-based and improve opportunities and services generally. They also address issues of equity and barriers to participation of poor people.

³ Some view this as the only practicable response to the enormous challenge posed by the DAC targets.

⁴ This does not imply that development activity itself should always be multi-sectoral. There is a need to conceive of problems and solutions in a holistic way, but then to select targeted and manageable approaches for implementation.

⁵ Indeed, the framework is says nothing about poverty *per se*. It can be used to help understand the livelihoods of both rich and poor.

⁶ This assumes that most poverty-focused research will continue to be publicly financed and that the public sector shares a commitment to poverty eradication.