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**RAPID ASSESSMENTS IN URBAN AREAS: LESSONS FROM
BANGLADESH AND TANZANIA**

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ABSTRACT

An understanding of urban issues is extremely important for programming, especially for organizations that have traditionally focused on assisting poor households and communities in rural areas. Development organizations and governments frequently use rapid assessment methods because they have limited resources and little time to devote to longer-term, more complex research projects. Generally these methods employ qualitative techniques to solicit information from relatively small numbers of people. The size and diversity of the urban environment complicate the ability of these methods to generate a reliable, representative picture of urban livelihoods and the needs and constraints facing the urban poor.

CARE's experiences in Bangladesh and Tanzania suggest a number of ways that rapid assessment procedures can be strengthened to address these concerns. The experiences in Bangladesh and Tanzania suggest that the principal challenges to the validity of rapid assessments in urban areas, when used for exploratory purposes, can be met through use of representative samples; use of a number of qualitative and quantitative approaches; incorporation of team members who represent a variety of perspectives, knowledge areas, and professions; and linkages with local organizations and community members who are familiar with the economic, political, social, and cultural context of the city, to ensure local involvement and a local perspective.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Assisting the urban poor will be a major challenge for governments and development organizations in the twenty-first century. In the next 25 years, the population of the developing world will grow from 4.9 billion to 6.8 billion. Over 90 percent of this increase will be in urban areas. By 2025, over half the population in Asia and Africa will live in urban areas, as will more than 80 percent of those in Latin America (United Nations 1998). Growth in urban poverty is likely to accompany increasing urbanization. In many developing countries, including China and India, urban poverty is already growing both in absolute numbers and as a percentage of the urban population (Haddad, Ruel, and Garrett 1999). Governments and development agencies are striving to address the needs of increasing numbers of urban poor, but much of the understanding of development is built from a rural, agrarian knowledge base. Organizations must now increasingly develop programs based on a new understanding of complex urban realities.

Governments and development organizations often use rapid assessment methods to explore livelihood conditions and identify programming needs in rural areas or specific sectors, such as health. These methods generally employ qualitative techniques to solicit information from relatively small numbers of people. Such methods include Rapid Rural Assessment (RRA), Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA), or Rapid Assessment Procedures (RAP). Less frequently, these methods have been employed to assess the livelihoods and needs of the urban poor (Ervin 1997; IIED 1994).

The size and diversity of the urban environment complicate the ability of these methods to generate a reliable, representative picture of the urban poor in a short amount of time. However, governments and development organizations, including nongovernmental and community-based organizations, often have limited resources and little time to devote to longer-term, more complex research projects that could provide a more complete picture.

CARE, the international NGO, uses rapid assessment methods to perform needs and opportunities analyses as part of the diagnostic phase of project and strategy planning. In Bangladesh and Tanzania, CARE used rapid assessment methods in urban areas to explore livelihood strategies, highlight constraints and needs, and identify potential interventions (CARE Tanzania 1998; Sutter and Perine 1998). The kinds of tools used in these assessments are widely known and will not be reviewed in detail here, but less is known—or at least documented—about *how* to use these tools in urban areas or the challenges urban areas pose to the use and validity of rapid assessment methods. To give insights on how to structure and strengthen rapid assessments in urban areas, this paper briefly describes how the assessments in Bangladesh and Tanzania were carried out, highlights the methodological challenges of using rapid assessment procedures in urban areas, and notes possible ways to respond to these challenges.

2. RAPID URBAN ASSESSMENTS IN BANGLADESH AND TANZANIA: METHODS AND LOGISTICS

WHY DO AN ASSESSMENT?

An understanding of urban issues is extremely important for programming, especially for organizations that may have traditionally focused on assisting poor rural households and communities. Rapid assessments allow participants to build a fairly comprehensive, multidimensional picture of the livelihood status of the urban poor within a neighborhood or city in a short time. With these assessments, organizations can then work with the community to diagnose the major problems affecting livelihood security and to highlight critical linkages between problems, such as the relation of low income to health insecurity and malnutrition, or the interaction among infrastructure deterioration, poor sanitation, and disease. Findings from the assessments then help organizations identify areas of potential intervention. By validating ideas and hypotheses in the field, comprehensive diagnoses through rapid assessment procedures help ensure that staff members involved in design and implementation have a thorough understanding of the needs and constraints facing a community—and the intersectoral links among those needs. The result should be projects that more reliably, and more sustainably, meet community needs.

Rapid assessments are particularly useful because they can also provide information specific to a potential area of intervention and can be tailored to meet program needs. For programming, this is especially important because data available from secondary sources often only cover large areas and provide only aggregate data,

obscuring the characteristics of any one community. Such surveys also tend to concentrate on major urban centers. In Bangladesh, for instance, there is much statistical information on Dhaka. Reliable data on the livelihoods and local characteristics of the poor in secondary cities, or in poor neighborhoods within major cities, are lacking, especially on the smaller, more concentrated pockets of poverty where development organizations are most likely to work. Rapid assessments can provide fairly quickly a general picture of the challenges the poor face in such specific areas of interest.

The assessments yield additional benefits by providing an opportunity to orient an organization's staff to a mix of methods useful to their work, including information-gathering techniques, participatory methods, and frameworks for analyzing data. The fieldwork allows the NGO, government representatives, and potential partner organizations to learn about each other, strengthen working relationships, and establish a basis for collaboration. The information produced by the assessments is itself an investment in knowledge. The data provide a basic reference on community life that can provide a foundation of information that participants, donor agencies, government officials, and community members can continue to use and build on in the future.

METHODS OF THE ASSESSMENT

In Bangladesh and Tanzania, the assessments provided information on the characteristics of the community and the households within that community. Tools were tailored to the appropriate level of analysis so that some instruments collected information at the community level and others at the household level. Given some

overlap in content, results from interviews at one level served to confirm and verify those from the other (see Figure 1).

The assessments used both qualitative and quantitative methods to provide a more complete picture of the community than could either approach alone. The quantitative surveys focused on prevalence or severity of a situation, such as how many houses had latrines or how many children were malnourished. The qualitative surveys highlighted the behaviors, motivations, and priorities of the residents and their explanations for the causes of their problems.

Staff from CARE and, in Tanzania, potential local partner organizations undertook the qualitative research. A review of available literature was conducted before starting primary data collection to gain insight on the economic, political, and social context, and to avoid duplicating work already done. An institutional survey identified other organizations active in the area and their programs. Key informants (two or three individuals), often community leaders or schoolteachers, provided information on community history, characteristics of the residents, and community infrastructure and services. They also helped to develop community maps. Large-group interviews, conducted with separate groups of men and women (15-20 individuals), contained questions about community history, accessibility and availability of services, and community priorities. In the large-group interviews, community residents also developed seasonal calendars that described fluctuations in employment, disease, and food prices and availability, among other items. Focus groups (6–10 individuals selected for certain

Figure 1—Integrating the techniques

Level of analysis	Data collection techniques	Key questions
Community	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Secondary data Key informants Observation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Indicators of urban livelihood security Community profile Community infrastructure Community institutions Community perceptions <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❖ services ❖ sources of vulnerability ❖ priorities ❖ problems and needs
Household	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Community group surveys (men and women) Focus groups 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Livelihood strategies <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❖ economic security ❖ food security ❖ health security ❖ housing security ❖ educational security ❖ community participation ❖ demographic characteristics ❖ problems and solutions
Individual	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Household survey Nutrition survey 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Nutritional status of children Nutritional status of women Nutritional status of mothers and children Household food consumption (frequency and diversity) Reproductive health Water and sanitation

shared characteristics, such as belonging to an especially vulnerable group, e.g., female heads of household, unemployed young men, or casual laborers) then explored the

specific threats to livelihoods they experienced and the livelihood strategies they employed.

Local firms with expertise in household surveys were contracted to carry out the quantitative surveys. These surveys included household demographics, employment, housing, health, and food and nutrition security. It also included a food frequency questionnaire and anthropometric measurements for children under age 5. The quantitative household surveys, statistically representative of each community, provided household-based data to enrich and compare with qualitative findings. The integration of quantitative and qualitative methods proved especially useful in confirming community-wide perceptions (checks on whether girls and boys actually did attend school at different rates, for instance), in helping to explain statistical findings (why there was a higher school dropout rate for boys than girls up to adolescence), and in pointing out areas needing further study, especially when results seemed contradictory (community interviews often highlighted land tenure as a critical problem, while the quantitative survey showed that most residents owned their houses).

ASSESSMENT LOGISTICS IN BANGLADESH

Assessments were carried out in the cities of Khulna, Tongi, and Bogra, which were chosen because they were “typical” Bangladeshi cities, representative of the economic base and problems found across a range of city sizes. According to the 1991 census, for example, Khulna had one million people; Tongi, 181,000 (although as practically a suburb of Dhaka, it seemed much larger); and Bogra, 130,000. In each city,

CARE worked with local community-based organizations (CBOs) and NGOs to purposively select three of the most disadvantaged areas in each city for assessment.

An experienced local firm was hired to carry out the quantitative survey. Using a cluster sample methodology (based on the well-known EPI method from epidemiology [Bennett et al. 1994; Bennett 1993]), the firm interviewed approximately 70 randomly chosen households in each community, for a total of 210 in each city. This method was relatively low-cost, but generated a representative sample of these areas that gave sufficiently precise results.

After gaining approval from local political leaders, CARE worked with local CBOs to carry out key informant interviews and to identify and invite people to attend the large-group discussion. These people were selected because, in the estimation of the CBO, they could discuss the community's situation honestly and knowledgeably, and would provide a representative cross-section of the opinions of the poorer strata of the community.

Qualitative interviewing took two days, with the large-group, community-level interviews taking place on the first day and the focus-group interviews on the second. Three teams, led by women and composed of eight individuals (four men and four women), conducted the qualitative interviews. Each day, they took notes, entered the data into matrices set up on laptop computers that tracked respondents' answers to each question, and analyzed the data. This method ensured that data were entered while fresh in the interviewers' minds. In each community, large-group interviews were held on the first evening. At the conclusion of that discussion, CARE staff determined the

characteristics of the focus groups they wanted to form (e.g., rickshaw drivers or garment-factory workers) the next day. Those in the large group who were selected for focus-group interviews invited other friends or colleagues who met the focus-group criteria. The next evening, interviews were held with a total of four focus groups (two for men and two for women) in each community.

Referring to the data matrices, teams used problem trees to perform a causal analysis of the qualitative data. The teams then critically reviewed the problem trees to identify key constraints. They then aggregated the analysis across communities and identified key potential areas for programming in each city. To avoid creating unrealistic expectations and reduce the potential for biased responses, the interviewers read a statement at the beginning of the large-group discussion to make clear that the purpose of the assessment was to gather information about the community, not to plan a project in the community; that the individual or community would not receive any compensation for participation in the assessment; and that residents should not necessarily expect a project in their community as a result of the assessment. In Bangladesh, at the end of the session, however, a meal packet was provided as a symbol of appreciation to all those who participated in the interview.

ASSESSMENT LOGISTICS IN TANZANIA

The assessment was carried out only in Dar es Salaam. Here, 12 communities within the city were selected. Each represented a different aspect of urban conditions that might affect, and differentiate, livelihood strategies. For example, communities were

located in the center, suburban, and peri-urban sections of the city; others comprised a mix of migrants or long-term residents; still others had access to infrastructure. Four teams of eight individuals performed the qualitative assessments. In addition to CARE staff, the teams included staff from other organizations, including NGOs and universities who could use the information and who might also work in partnership with CARE in the future on urban programs.

Key informant interviews were carried out at the same time as the qualitative interviews, instead of before as in Bangladesh. Teams were thus less familiar with the site because they did not have the key informant findings to review beforehand. CBOs in the communities tended to be weak, so invitations to community residents were extended through local government party officials. Focus-group interviews were held not only with particularly vulnerable groups but also with groups that were felt to be integral parts of the development process but on which information was lacking, such as women who sold street foods, young adults, and shopkeepers. In Tanzania, participants had a small break with soft drinks during the interview. As in Bangladesh, local organizations conducted the quantitative surveys.

Tanzanian teams initially analyzed the data for each community using problem trees, as in Bangladesh. They then performed more extensive analysis to identify linkages among problems and determine which problems were most prevalent across communities. Combined with available information on CARE's mission, donor interest, and activities of other NGOs and CBOs in the city, this last analysis suggested priority themes for possible development assistance.

3. STRENGTHENING RAPID URBAN ASSESSMENT PROCEDURES

Given the complexity of the urban environment, any method that seeks to rapidly produce a complete but reliable picture of urban life faces formidable challenges. Harris, Jerome, and Fawcett (1997) review and critique rapid assessment procedures using the standards for evaluation set out by the Joint Committee on Standards for Education Evaluation (1994): accuracy, reliability, feasibility, utility, and propriety. While these standards were developed for the evaluation of educational programs in North America, they remain valid even in a developing-country context and are useful for highlighting specific areas of potential weakness for assessments in urban areas.

- *Accuracy* has a number of aspects.
 - Context: Do we retain full and proper description of the economic, political, social, and cultural context of the area?
 - Construct validity: Are we correctly interpreting what we observe? Are we truly understanding the data we have collected?
 - Measurement validity: Are we measuring what we intend to measure? Are the instruments appropriate? Do they produce valid data?
 - External validity: Are our conclusions more broadly applicable? Can we generalize beyond the observed conditions?
- *Reliability* asks whether the assessment procedures could produce the same results repeatedly.

- *Feasibility* refers to whether the procedures are appropriate, affordable, and politically viable.
- *Utility* considers how useful the results will be to users, e.g., policymakers or development practitioners.
- *Propriety* refers to using methods that are ethical and fair to those involved in the assessment.

The urban environment presents significant challenges to each of these standards.

ACCURACY

Context

Broader economic and political variables can be especially important in urban communities. Macroeconomic factors, such as inflation, structural adjustment programs, and unemployment, can have profound effects. Complex political entanglements among communities, municipalities, and national governments affect communities and their potential to respond. Rapid assessments, based in disciplinary approaches of anthropology and sociology, often do a good job of bringing attention to reasons for individual and household behaviors and to the social and cultural characteristics of a community. But assessments may overlook important economic and political factors external to the community.

The Overlay and Diversity of “Communities”

In cities, individuals can belong to many different “communities,” which frequently extend beyond the geographical. Urban communities may be based on gender, religion, ethnicity, or occupational groups. For example, in Bangladesh, rickshaw operators are a tightly controlled and highly organized group that permeates and links neighborhoods across the city.

In rural areas, geographical settlements are more isolated, and different types of communities tend to overlap. Rural assessments can reasonably assume that social networks inside the geographic community provide much of the support for livelihood strategies on a day-to-day basis. In urban areas, the numbers are great enough, and the distances small enough, that households can link with many different sorts of communities fairly easily and so access many connections and resources outside geographical, often arbitrary, administrative boundaries. An urban assessment must then consider the resources available to urban households via their access to these different communities, and also consider the different threats that can arise to households from them.

Construct Validity

Understanding the environment is important both when collecting and interpreting the data to ensure that researchers do not assign inaccurate meanings to responses or observations.

Those who design the data collection instruments must understand the environment, but the perspectives and behaviors of the interviewers themselves can introduce bias. In qualitative research, interviewers often need to explore an issue with the respondent; they need to know the context for a respondent's statement, to understand it, challenge it, or clarify it. Without such knowledge, the interviewer's task is much more difficult, and avenues of inquiry and paths of understanding will remain unexplored.

As Harris, Jerome, and Fawcett (1997) note, the construct validity of traditional ethnography is presumed to be high because researchers spend years observing and living in the community. Rapid rural assessments may also be able to claim relatively high levels of construct validity because, in general, researchers and NGOs in developing countries have greater knowledge about rural livelihoods than urban ones.

Staff unfamiliar with urban issues may fail to pursue lines of thought or puzzle through the statements of the respondent. They may have underlying assumptions about urban life that affect how they interpret respondents' statements.

Measurement Validity

Various aspects of the urban environment can make it difficult to ensure that the approach being used is collecting appropriate and accurate information:

Defining the "city." Two surveys that calculated the prevalence of urban agriculture could arrive at very different results if one surveyed households only within city limits and another surveyed a metropolitan region, which would generally contain more

agriculturally based households. The assessment needs to make sure that the area of analysis—the city—is well-defined, but how does one define the city? In Bangladesh and Tanzania, in no case were the boundaries of the city, at least in terms of typically urban characteristics such as dense population and lack of widespread agriculture, easily identifiable. Tongi, practically a suburb of Dhaka, blends easily into surrounding urban areas. Where does Tongi end and another city begin? Khulna and Dar es Salaam are large metropolitan areas, and Bogra is a small city. These urban agglomerations rise up gradually from the countryside. Where do they begin and where does the countryside end?

Interviewing appropriate respondents. Surveys and interviews need ensure that respondents are those who can provide the most accurate answers to the questions. To ensure measurement validity, however, the assessment must be sure to ask the “right” people about the “right” things. While women may know most about childcare and home hygiene, men may make most budget decisions. Women and men may have different perceptions of social networks and power relations within the community. Assessments need to be sure to interview the most appropriate respondent. But this may not be easy.

In rural areas, it is possible to meet with individuals at home during the day or find people at work in the fields. In cities, both men and women commonly work outside the home and often outside the community. Urban dwellers are most likely at home outside of work hours, in the early morning or late afternoon and evening. Many of them work at casual jobs, and so may also work evening shifts or on weekends. It may be

difficult to catch potential respondents at home during the day or to interview them at work, where their work schedule is often under a manager's control, not theirs.

Unfortunately, many urban neighborhoods are unsafe at night, and conducting interviews at that time may be dangerous for both interviewers and respondents.

External Validity

The mobility of households and the rapidity with which economic development or decline may affect a region, a city, or neighborhood can make it difficult to generalize findings from a limited area to a larger one, from one city to others in the country, or from a few neighborhoods to the entire city. Qualitative surveys often do not attempt to obtain a representative sample for the area of interest. In a dynamic urban environment, even statistically representative quantitative surveys may not be generalizable to other neighborhoods, other cities, or across time.

RELIABILITY

In addition to wanting the findings to be generalizable beyond the observed sample, to increase confidence in the results and methods, one wants assurance that if the assessment were conducted again in the same places in the same way, the same results would be obtained. If findings are not robust, an organization should rightly be wary of basing funding decisions on the assessment's outcome, as the findings may not accurately represent the community's needs and constraints. The representativeness of the sample

and the ability of those responsible for carrying out the assessment are two key factors affecting the reliability of assessment results.

Dealing with Diversity

In rural areas, assessments often gather individuals for qualitative interviews simply by staking out a central location and interviewing people walking by. Crowds gather spontaneously, and soon there are enough people to conduct a fairly comprehensive community interview. In rural areas, the sources of livelihood and the community conditions and resources tend to be more similar and often more known to other members of the community. Because they move less frequently, rural residents have a longer time to get to know other households. Homogeneity of livelihoods and shared knowledge about local conditions mean that spontaneously formed groups probably can provide a fairly reliable picture of rural livelihoods.

But in urban neighborhoods, such a central place may not exist and the diversity of livelihoods and livelihood strategies may not be adequately represented by a group of passers by. Those who are available may not even be residents but simply those who work in the area. Many people work outside the community or have jobs that do not permit them to join spontaneously formed groups during the day. With greater social independence, urban dwellers also may have less sense of the problems and constraints, as well as the coping strategies, of their neighbors than do rural residents. For all these reasons, a spontaneously formed group is not likely to adequately represent the diverse livelihoods found in an urban community.

Improving Participant Skills

Organizational staff may not possess the skills needed to carry out quantitative or qualitative surveys and interviews. Quantitative surveys require substantial expertise to ensure that appropriate sampling strategies are used and fieldwork is carried out well, especially when taking anthropometric measures or measures of income, expenditure, and consumption, especially food. Qualitative interviews often follow only a broad guideline, and the interviewer allows the conversation to flow, pursuing topics as they arise. Producing good, consistent data with this method requires substantial knowledge and experience to ensure questions are asked to different people in a consistent way and that responses are adequately followed-up and probed.

FEASIBILITY

Methods are feasible if they are appropriate (culturally sensitive), politically viable (acceptable to those who can deny access to people or information), affordable (not too costly), and easy to implement (effort required to get the information is commensurate with the results) (Harris, Jerome, and Fawcett 1997).

The diversity of cultures, complex politics, and often-diminished social cohesion within a geographically bound urban community can increase distrust of outsiders. Crime, too, is generally a greater problem in urban than in rural areas, which heightens the threat of physical violence to both interviewer and respondent. For both these reasons, residents may hesitate to come to large-group or focus-group interviews.

Trying to schedule interviews around the work schedules and other demands on the time of urban dwellers may be difficult. These demands affect not only community residents but also those carrying out the assessment. In rural assessments, staff usually are away from their homes. In urban assessments, staff frequently conduct the assessment in their home city, where demands from work and family can easily pull them away from their responsibilities in the assessment. These conditions challenge the ability of the assessment to capture the diversity of the community and get access to the most informed respondents.

Finally, *rapid* does not mean *cheap*. Although rapid assessments may be less costly than long-term research projects, quality assessments still require substantial time and resources. Assessments can involve months of preparation, including designing, training, and securing of logistical support and outside expertise.

UTILITY

In order for the results of the assessment to be useful to those who have a stake in, or are affected by, the project, the assessment team must be credible and produce an informative and timely product. In an urban environment, many organizations and individuals wield influence over decision-making and often can fairly easily throw up obstacles to implementation of the assessment or resulting projects. These different actors, from individual households to community leaders and organizations to municipal and national authorities, must consider themselves owners of the information and must

understand how to use it if they are to work together effectively to improve urban livelihoods.

PROPRIETY

Conduct of the assessment should follow accepted ethical standards and must be fair to those who are involved and will be affected by the results of the assessment.

4. MEETING STANDARDS IN URBAN ASSESSMENTS: LESSONS FROM THE FIELD

ACCURACY

Context

A number of methods can help rapid assessments capture context in urban areas. Use of a conceptual framework can guide interview design to make sure the questions capture the different elements of context. Development of the questions for the quantitative surveys and the qualitative interviews relied explicitly on CARE's Household Livelihood Security framework (Frankenberger 1996; Frankenberger and McCaston 1998). The framework itself highlights the importance of the social, cultural, and political environment, and the links between different aspects of livelihood security, such as income, health, and nutrition. Team members familiar with the urban environment or the community itself also participated, helping to make sure the questions accurately reflected urban realities. Interviews with key informants and community

groups were also especially appropriate places to ask questions about broader, contextual variables that affect the life and development of the community.

Data from secondary sources or additional commissioned studies provided additional context. In Bangladesh, CARE reviewed a comprehensive report on urban poverty, just completed by the Asian Development Bank, and commissioned Dhaka University to do an additional study on the operations of NGOs working in urban Bangladesh. The multidisciplinary composition of the teams themselves also helped elucidate context.

Construct Validity

Having team members with varied backgrounds and different disciplines and professions is important to elucidating context but is especially critical for construct validity. Teams were composed of professional CARE staff and, in Tanzania, from other NGOs and organizations such as universities. Team members, primarily Bangladeshi or Tanzanian, represented a range of sectors and knowledge of issues, including health, credit, education, urban development, and gender. Exchanges among team members ensured that the questions appropriately reflected the urban reality and that the interviewer and respondent both correctly understood questions and responses. In particular, team members held practice sessions in Bangla or Swahili. In pursuing questions or interpreting answers from the qualitative interviews, then, these team members, with differing experiences and perspectives, were able to place the responses in their appropriate context.

Measurement Validity

Defining the “city.” Because urban, peri-urban, and rural areas often share characteristics that differ mostly in degree, trying to distinguish precise dividing lines among them is often impossible, and may not be especially useful. The most important guideline for assessments is to identify the area about which information is needed rather than what is urban and what is rural. The communities chosen for the assessment should adequately represent the context, characteristics, and issues that are most pertinent to the project. The study should then accurately represent those limits to others, to avoid misinterpretation. The assessments in Bangladesh and Tanzania, for instance, were not representative of the entire city but rather focused on the needs of the urban poor in each city. Reasoning that any initial intervention would go through the local city administration, CARE used the administrative limits of the city as the boundaries of the study area and then purposively chose sites for the quantitative and qualitative surveys. Knowledgeable staff from CBOs and NGOs working in the city were consulted about which wards—and neighborhoods within those wards—were particularly vulnerable.

Interviewing the appropriate respondent. Two principal strategies were used to speak with the most appropriate respondents. CBOs working in the assessment announced the large-group interviews ahead of time, so individuals could plan to attend. Qualitative interviews were carried out in the evening or on days off, to increase the probability that respondents would be in the area. Although the interview guides were the same, women and men were interviewed separately to capture gender-based differences in perceptions.

Community or other political leaders who might influence participants' opinions were identified and separated from the group for smaller-group interviews. In Bangladesh, cultural or socioeconomic differences could also influence responses. For example, in Bangladesh, Biharis, refugees stranded since the War of Independence, were interviewed separately from Bengalis.

External Validity

In both assessments, one of the principal objectives was to get an overview of the livelihoods of the urban poor that could be generalized across the country (Bangladesh) and across the city (Tanzania). In Bangladesh, CARE posited that conditions and strategies might depend on the size of the city. Smaller, more isolated cities might have more similarities to rural livelihoods, for instance. Consequently, CARE carried out the assessment in three cities that were “typical” of a range of Bangladeshi cities, though Dhaka, as a megacity with a number of NGOs already working there, was excluded. In addition, CARE selected three neighborhoods in each city to represent the range of livelihoods of the urban poor within that city.

In Tanzania, CARE collected data only on Dar es Salaam. They collected data from 12 sites within the city, all of which had been selected to represent different characteristics that might affect livelihood outcomes. These characteristics included planned and unplanned settlements, central city and periphery, areas with larger and smaller proportions of recent migrants, densely and less densely populated areas, and areas with and without sufficient infrastructure and services.

Although not a perfectly representative sample, the information gleaned from the assessment in Bangladesh was sufficient to begin to generate an idea about how urban issues differed or were shared across cities. Social cohesion and availability of infrastructure, for instance, seemed to vary by location, but employment among the poor in the communities tended to be casual with seasonal peaks and troughs. Similarities and differences were also apparent in Tanzania. Across communities, access to health services and water was a shared concern, but the assessment pointed out differences among them. Central urban areas, for instance, suffered from broken water pumps and water mains, but in peri-urban areas, the problem was that there simply was no infrastructure: many people used hand-dug wells that were easily contaminated. These findings can be compared with other sources of information on other areas to provide insights into how generalizable they are. In any case, the generation of generalizable information should be seen as a dynamic process; over time, information on other sites will be added to the information and common threads among the findings will emerge.

Triangulation

Triangulation of information—the corroboration of information by collecting data on the same question from different sources, often using different methods—is essential to accuracy. In diverse, complex urban environments, interviews with one group or a small number of households may give only part of the story or may provide a misleading impression of the constraints and conditions experienced by an average urban household in that neighborhood.

These assessments used a number of sources, each of which had some overlap to allow for triangulation (see Figure 1). A review of the secondary data provided insights into the urban environment, which the surveys could then check, enrich, and expand. By comparing information from within the different sources of qualitative information (key informants, community- and focus-group interviews, including community maps and seasonal calendars), CARE could see how and if they told a consistent story, and could follow up where there were discrepancies.

The complementarity of quantitative and qualitative methods also provided another source for triangulation. The household surveys provided a statistically valid and representative picture (within understood limits of precision) of each community. Figures from the household survey could be used to check information from the qualitative interview. For example, statements such as “no one here ever drinks milk” were not true in Bangladesh, though it was true that not very many did. Similarly, the statement that “only boys go to school because girls have to stay home and work” was not entirely accurate in Tanzania, where girls actually have higher attendance rates than boys up to adolescence before attendance rates drop below those of boys. Information from the qualitative survey was helpful in understanding responses, and sometimes correcting questions, in the quantitative survey. In Bangladesh, for example, it was hard to understand why so many people feared eviction when they owned their houses. The qualitative responses shed light on this problem: residents can own their houses (the materials they bought to build the house), but they do not own the land on which it sits.

RELIABILITY

Getting a representative sample is key to ensuring that findings will be replicable. If the characteristics of the individuals interviewed vary greatly each time, findings will also vary, reducing reliability of results. Interviewers who are not well grounded in methods or who use measurements that are not standardized will add to variation as well. Of course, using appropriate methods and reliable instruments are also important, for reasons cited elsewhere.

Perhaps it is most important to note that to get a representative sounding, fundamental principles of sampling can apply to the selection of individuals for qualitative as well as quantitative interviews. When some aspects of the environment are known and believed to possibly influence outcomes (such as ethnicity, density, or availability of infrastructure), the sample should include individuals with these characteristics. Random sampling across a population guards against the bias these factors can cause by working to capture the variation present in the group. If sampling is not random, the procedure may result in a selection of people who are not representative of a cross-section of urban lives in that neighborhood, causing the findings to be biased. If representativeness is desired, and random sampling is not used, assessment design must identify these potential sources of bias and, at a minimum, be aware of their influence when interpreting findings. In some cases, in fact, representativeness is not the objective. Purposive sampling, for example, is appropriate when selecting individuals for focus groups, where usually the objective is, in fact, to get a homogenous group that shares a specific characteristic (Patton 1990).

Dealing with Diversity

For its purposes, CARE wanted samples that were both representative of the community as a whole and that represented a particular livelihood or other group of interest. In Bangladesh the quantitative survey followed a cluster-sampling methodology that selected households randomly. For the qualitative interviews, CARE worked with CBOs familiar with the area to select key informants and invite specific participants that represented a wide range of community livelihoods and opinion to the community interviews. Although it may ease access to community residents and increase their trust in the assessment process, working through community organizations may unwittingly cause bias in participant selection. Logically, if organizations are given the opportunity to select participants, they will select those with whom they are most familiar. In Tanzania, because CBOs in urban areas were weak and a single-party political structure still predominated, CARE had to work through local government officials. This meant that the participants would most likely be favorable to any questions having to do with government operations or provision of services.

In both countries, CARE attempted to gain some idea of the source and degree of this bias by asking questions at the start of the qualitative interviews, when personal introductions were made, about the occupation and background of each individual, how they found out about the interview, and who invited them. Sitting among their neighbors, it seemed probable that individuals would answer such questions truthfully, and so the team could then make some initial judgments about whether the group reflected the diversity of the community or not and could be alert to potential biases in answers.

In Bangladesh government officials and community leaders were taken aside after this initial round of introductions for their own “special session” with another facilitator. These separate interviews had the advantages of adding more information (they were more like key informant interviews and served to verify other sources of information) as well as removing the influence of these individuals from the other group.

In obtaining answers, however, an organization’s own reputation may precede it, biasing responses regardless of the representativeness of the surveyed group. Residents in Bangladesh knew that CARE often built roads in rural areas, for instance. When residents stated they wanted CARE to build roads in their community, it was unclear whether that was because building roads was indeed a community priority or because these residents believed that CARE would be more predisposed to building roads there than undertaking other types of interventions.

Improving Participant Skills

To reduce these influences and counter the potential for individual perceptions biasing the questions or interpretation, staff went through a weeklong training session in qualitative research methods to provide them with a common understanding and approach. The training session covered the Household Livelihood Security conceptual framework; reviewed available information on urban livelihoods; trained in techniques for interviewing and for analysis; and conducted field trials to pretest survey instruments. In feedback sessions, team members discussed the content and organization of the questionnaires (including flow of the questionnaire, how well the questions

communicated the desired meaning in the national language, and how well respondents understood) as well as how to manage the interview process (ensuring participation or keeping the interview on track, for example) and how to deal with logistical issues (lack of lighting, for instance). These efforts were aimed at improving the reliability of the surveys, as well as their measurement validity.

Given the relatively low level of experience among staff and partners, consistency across interviewers was enhanced by providing a fairly standardized set of topics for the interviewers to follow. Each interview was conducted by one facilitator and recorded by one note taker. Interviewers were encouraged to probe answers where appropriate and to solicit opinions from all members of the group, but, given the guidelines, the data were still usable even if the interview team did not excel at this. Often there was at least one other observer. Other team members would often speak up during the interview to ask additional questions if they felt the interviewer had failed to follow up sufficiently.

Teams had another opportunity to assure the validity of their findings by presenting a synthesis of their findings for each site to the entire group. Members of other teams provided comments and insights, which were then incorporated into the approach at the next site. Teams undertook further analysis of the data at a weeklong session at the end of the data collection period.

FEASIBILITY

Covering Costs

The assessments seemed to put relatively more strain on a country office's human and physical resources rather than its financial ones. Although not cheap, with some financial assistance from headquarters, the country offices managed to finance the assessments. On the other hand, the assessments required a long-term (a month or so) commitment from a large number of staff who normally worked on other projects and who retained those commitments. The assessments also made intensive demands on secretarial time and office equipment, including photocopiers, computers, and printers, which were not always working or available.

Compared to rural rapid assessment procedures, the cost of urban rapid assessments may be lower because transport distances are shorter between neighborhoods and, where staff live in the city, the organization may not have to pay per diem expenses. CARE-Bangladesh's choice of three cities outside of the main office where almost everyone worked meant that it had to transport all those involved (study teams and logistic support staff) to each city, paying per diem and air transport for everyone. CARE-Tanzania paid additional honoraria to those participants who were not CARE employees.

Dealing with Logistics

Logistically, cities also present unique challenges. Urban areas are usually compact, with few open spaces where interviews can take place over a period of time. Interviews were typically scheduled in places where members of the community might meet, including schoolrooms and community meeting halls. These rooms provided a comfortable, safe place for the relatively long interviews to take place, with less distraction than if the interviews were held in the open air. Because the interviews tended to occur during the evening or late afternoon, CARE also needed to ensure that lighting was available. Electric outages were common, so gas lamps were carried along.

Working with Partners

Partnering with trusted local organizations can reduce many of the challenges to feasibility. By working with local staff and local organizations, CARE gained credibility and trust with the community, which likely improved the willingness of residents to provide complete and honest responses. This approach also helped ensure CARE's introduction to a community and its procedures were appropriate to the local culture.

Politically, the city may be more complex than rural areas. In Bangladesh, even within the same community, CARE often needed to contact different neighborhood leaders to obtain support. In Tanzania, contact with residents had to be made initially through political structures. Permission to conduct the assessment was always granted,

but CARE had to be especially careful to make the purpose of the assessment clear and to keep local leaders aware of the assessment's schedule and progress.

In Bangladesh, selected CBOs helped set up interviews and helped CARE to understand the community's needs, problems, and political sensitivities. CBOs, NGOs, and local government officials know the area and can provide protection, help to get the unit of analysis right by identifying especially vulnerable and poor neighborhoods, and improve the assessment's reliability by helping to ensure that a cross-section of the community attends the interview. CBOs can also help to determine if there are any "hidden" vulnerable groups, like street children or elderly people living alone, who should be interviewed.

Safety of interviewers and respondents was a priority, especially since many interviews took place at night. First, CARE would explore its concerns with safety with CBOs working in the area and secure the approval of local political leaders, which, it was felt, provided an aura of protection. Meetings were held in publicly visible spots, with groups of individuals and never fewer than two interviewers. CARE vehicles transported interviewers to and from the place of the interview.

In Tanzania, staff and community organizations agreed that the neighborhoods were too dangerous to conduct interviews after dark, so interview times were moved up so that they could be completed by day's end. To some degree, this affected the characteristics of the individuals who were able to attend the interviews. Although many

people were either unemployed or worked at or near their homes, others worked outside the community and were not generally available for interviews.

UTILITY

To ensure that the assessment addressed key issues, CARE consulted with government officials, donors, and researchers—as well as key CARE project staff—to discover which issues were most important. In Tanzania, potential organizational partners, including staff of local NGOs and local government leaders, participated in training and, in some cases, joined the interview teams. Their participation plausibly increased their sense of ownership of the assessment process and results, heightening the possibility that the findings would be used. In Bangladesh, CARE used the results of the assessment almost immediately to prepare a project proposal that was later funded. In Tanzania, a summary of the findings was presented back to these organizations and local government leaders only days after data collection and initial analysis were finished.

The organization's credibility can also enhance utility. CARE's reputation for effective development work enhanced the credibility of the assessments' findings with donors and government officials, an important fact, given that the organization's work in urban areas was limited. Teams, including leaders, were formed almost entirely of a varied group of Bangladeshis or Tanzanians, a characteristic that further enhanced the credibility of the findings.

PROPRIETY

Although the quantitative survey did not involve any invasive procedures, enumerators secured consent from each household before conducting the interview. At the start of each qualitative interview, facilitators reviewed the purpose of the assessment with participants and addressed their expectations, noting that there would be no compensation for their participation, either individually or to the community.

5. CONCLUSION

The diversity of urban areas presents substantial challenges to the validity of information from rapid assessments, yet CARE's experiences in Bangladesh and Tanzania suggest a number of ways that rapid assessment procedures can be strengthened to address these concerns. The experiences showed how rapid assessments can be used for a variety of purposes. In these assessments, for example, the primary objective was to gain an overview of problems facing the urban poor, using an exploratory approach. Although not participatory in the classical PRA sense, information was fed back to the community and the inclusion of staff from CARE and potential partners helped build capacity to perform rapid assessments on other topics in the future. The experiences in Bangladesh and Tanzania suggest that the principal challenges to the validity of rapid assessments in urban areas, when used for exploratory purposes, can be met through use of representative samples; use of a number of—as well as a combination of—qualitative and quantitative approaches; incorporation of team members who represent a variety of

perspectives, knowledge areas, and professions; and linkages with local organizations and community members who are familiar with the economic, political, social, and cultural context of the city, to ensure local involvement and a local perspective, instead of simply an outsider's view.

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