The National Identification of Poor Households Programme—a Key Tool to Support Equitable Development

*by Julian Hansen**

Background

In Cambodia until recently, poverty-oriented development planning and service provision have not focussed enough attention on targeting assistance to poor people. Where household targeting has been used, each institution has developed and applied its own procedures and criteria for identifying beneficiaries. This means that results are not comparable and are generally also not shared with other organisations or institutions.

At a national forum organised by the Ministry of Planning (MOP) in February 2005, there was broad consensus on the need to develop standardised national procedures for identification of poor households, in order to reduce the overall administrative costs of selecting target groups and to allow more efficient distribution of scarce development resources to those who need them most. A Working Group on Identification of Poor Households, chaired by the MOP and with technical support from German Technical Cooperation (GTZ), was established in June 2005 as a sub-group of the Technical Working Group on Planning & Poverty Reduction. Working group members include representatives of line ministries, donors and international and non-government organisations. A smaller core group worked in 2005 and 2006 in a consultative process to develop initial procedures and a standard questionnaire for conducting poor household identification in rural areas (urban areas were not yet considered a priority).

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In order to secure mid-term assistance to introduce a standardised tool, the MOP approached the German government for additional financial and technical support. This was granted, and the German government in early 2006 commissioned GTZ Cambodia to assist the MOP through the "Support to Identification of Poor Households Programme" (IDPoor). This support began in April 2006, and the current phase will be completed at the end of 2009.

Objectives

The overall objective of the MOP programme is to mandate official standardised procedures for identification of poor households and to achieve their increasing use throughout Cambodia. A key component of this will be to integrate identification of poor households as a routine task of commune councils and their support structures (e.g. the provincial local administration unit and provincial and district facilitation teams).

Another key objective of the programme is to promote widespread use of the collected data by government institutions, non-government organisations and sector programmes and projects, as well as commune councils, as a tool for targeting services and assistance to poor households.

What Is Identification of Poor Households? Why Do We Need it?

The procedures used by the MOP and partner organisations seek to determine which households are poor and the poverty level of these individual households in rural villages. These households and their members are identified by name as well as location. The purpose of identifying individual households is to target services and development assistance to the poorest households in a village in order to help lift them out of poverty and protect them from shocks (e.g. serious illness, crop failure) that may deepen their poverty.

The Identification of Poor Households data can also be used for calculating comparative poverty levels of villages, based on the percentage of households in each poverty category in each village. Service providers can use this data to target poorer communes or villages and the poor households within those areas.

In Cambodia there are many potential uses for data on poor households, such as the provision of free or discounted medical services (e.g. through health equity funds or social health insurance), scholarships or other financial support to poor pupils and students, rural development and agricultural services, allocation of social concession land and many others. There is also potential for developing conditional or unconditional cash transfer programmes.

Where Is Identification of Poor Households Being Conducted?

In 2007, the MOP, in cooperation with the Ministry of the Interior, tested on a small scale the first version of the procedures and questionnaire, then modified and implemented them on a large scale in Kratie (whole province) and Siem Reap (Soutr Nikom and Kralanh operational districts [OD]s). In 2008, implementation was expanded into the whole of Oddar Meanchey, three ODs in Kompong Cham (Cheung Prey/Batheay, Chamkar Leu/ Stung Trang and Prey Chhor/Kang Meas), and two ODs in Prey Veng (Pea Reang and Preah Sdach). Thus, as of July 2008, identification of poor households using the national procedures implemented by the MOP had been conducted in a total of five provinces (partial or full coverage) and a total of 2128 villages.

In early 2009, the MOP plans to conduct updates in the previous areas, as well as covering two additional ODs in Kompong Cham (Memut and Ponhea Kraek). Kompong Thom and Kampot provinces may also be covered (subject to sufficient funds being available).

Feedback from implementers and stakeholders has been collected during operations in order to improve the procedures and their implementation. Consultation with the national core group and working group is ongoing to guide strategy and further policy development.

In addition to the five provinces partially or fully covered by the MOP, health equity fund operators and their partners have been using the procedures in a number of other areas. In 2007 and 2008, University Research Company's HSSC (Health Systems Strengthening in Cambodia) has been implementing the national procedures in five ODs in the provinces of Banteay Meanchey, Battambang and Pursat. In the same period, the NGO Reproductive Health Association of Cambodia has been implementing the procedures in five ODs in Sihanoukville, Kompong Chhnang and Kompong Cham. HSSC plans to cover Ratanakkiri, Mondolkiri and Koh Kong (Srae Ambel and Smach Meanchey ODs) in late 2008–early 2009.

All areas covered by the MOP and partner organisations are areas in which health equity funds are operating. Many areas also have substantial numbers of other types of service providers. The MOP considered it important to select areas in which there are sufficient services available to justify the effort and cost of the research and to maximise the likelihood that the benefits of identifying poor households will be recognised by local communities and authorities.

How Is Identification of Poor Households Conducted?

The identification process in each village is carried out by a village representative group (VRG), with the support and supervision of a planning and budgeting committee representative group, the commune council and representatives from the district facilitation team.

The process is coordinated by the provincial Department of Planning, in cooperation with the provincial local administration unit. The MOP provides provincial training, monitors implementation and gives ongoing technical support.

Implementation depends on a cascade training approach. National ministry staff train provincial facilitation team and district facilitation team members as trainers and provide support to enable them to train commune councils, planning and budgeting committee representative groups, VRGs and others involved to carry out the identification.

The identification consists of seven steps. These are described in detail in the document *Procedures for Identification of Poor Households in Cambodia* (available from www.mop.gov.kh/ProgramsProjects/IDPoor/tabid/ 154/Default.aspx). These steps are summarised in the box.

Step 1: Establish and train the planning and budgeting committee representative group
- Hold meeting of commune planning and budgeting committee to select representatives
- Train representative group members
- Train commune trainers

Step 2: Establish and train village representative groups
- Conduct first village meeting to select members of VRG
- Commune trainers train VRGs, conduct interview practice

Step 3: VRG compiles list of households in the village, conducts household interviews and compiles first draft list of poor households
- Compile list of households in the village
- Conduct household interviews
- Count scores, prepare draft household poverty list
- Discuss special household circumstances in VRG and modify classifications of some households as required
- Hold commune review meeting to check draft household poverty list
- Prepare first draft list of poor households

Step 4: Conduct village consultation meeting on first draft list of poor households, receive villager complaints and prepare final draft list of poor households
- Display first draft list of poor households in public place in village
- Conduct village consultation meeting
- Receive villager complaints
- Prepare the final draft list of poor households, submit to commune council

Step 5: Commune council reviews and approves final list of poor households
- Commune council reviews final draft lists of poor households for each village, resolves any outstanding complaints
- Commune council approves final list of poor households

- Commune council sends list of households in the village, final list of poor households, questionnaires and approval form to provincial Department of Planning
- Commune council chairperson stamps and signs equity cards, and VRGs distribute them to poor households (after data entry and photography in steps 6 and 7)

Step 6: Provincial Department of Planning enters list of households in the village, final list of poor households, questionnaires, household photographs and photography tracking sheets for each village into provincial database of poor households

Step 7: Photography

- Photography teams photograph poor households
- Provincial Department of Planning enters photos into provincial database
- Equity cards are printed, and provincial Department of Planning distributes them to commune councils

The above process involves substantial villager participation and consultation: they elect the village representative group, some villagers become members of the village representative group, they are respondents in interviews, they take part in a village consultation meeting to discuss the first draft list of poor households, and they can make suggestions or objections relating to the composition of the first and final draft list of poor households.

The key output in the commune and village is a final list of poor households in each village.

In addition, depending on requirements, all households identified as poor can be issued with equity cards, which include the following information: name of village, commune, district and province; name, sex and year of birth of household head; poverty level; household photo. These cards 1) raise the awareness of poor households that they can seek out services and assistance and assert their eligibility to receive them, and 2) help service providers to verify quickly the identity of poor household members in order to provide services to them.

Lists of poor households are updated annually in order to maintain their accuracy, using the same procedures and questionnaire.

Questionnaire

Currently, a standard questionnaire is used in all areas, regardless of whether the process is carried out by the MOP or by partner organisations, in order to optimise comparability of the results among households and among geographical regions. The questionnaire consists of a set of common-sense proxy indicators for poverty, agreed by the national Working Group on Identification of Poor Households, which are mainly based on easily observable and verifiable assets but also include a number of other considerations, such as dependency ratio, school attendance, crises or shocks and household composition. Interviews are conducted by VRG members, whose local

knowledge makes it easier to verify whether respondents are accurately reporting their situation, as well as to assess the special circumstances of households.

The questionnaire contains scoring and non-scoring questions. The scoring questions are the primary basis for assigning households to poverty categories or for excluding them from the list. The questions have different weights, based on their perceived contribution to or reflection of poverty. These weights are not scientifically calculated, but were decided on by the national working group based on field experience. These questions cover the following:

- housing—roof, wall, floor area, general condition
- productive land area (land-based villages) or fishing equipment (floating villages) or other sources of income such as wage labour, salary or business
- borrowing rice or buying rice on credit (indicates capacity to meet own food needs)
- animal raising (including fish raising for sale)
- ratio of dependent members to productive household members
- electronic and other assets
- means of transportation (including boats for floating villages)

Non-scoring questions relate to issues that are difficult to assign a simple score to. The VRG discusses and considers the responses to these in terms of their impact on a household. It also takes into account any information, suggestions or complaints made by villagers during the public consultation. The VRG may use this information to modify the poverty category of a household. The non-scoring questions cover the following:

- unexpected problems or crises in the last 12 months that caused the household to lose income, produce less food, sell assets or borrow money
- the number of children aged 6–11 years who missed school for at least one month in the last 12 months
- special household situations (disabled, sick, elderly, divorced/widowed, no adults etc)

For more detail, please see the detailed questionnaire on the web page: www.mop.gov.kh/ProgramsProjects/ IDPoor/tabid/154/Default.aspx.

Poverty Categories

There are two categories to which poor households can be assigned: poor level 1 (very poor) or poor level 2 (poor). These categories are assigned based on the questionnaire scores (according to specific cut-off points) and a consideration of any special circumstances. The proportions of households falling into the two categories have been calibrated to reflect approximately the 2004 Cambodian Socio-Economic Survey results (with some allowance for variation over time). Poor level 1 roughly corresponds to those households under the CSES food poverty line, while poor level 2 approximately equates to the households between the CSES food poverty line and

the poverty line. On average, a total of about one-third of households are classified as poor 1 or 2 and included in the list of poor households.

Strengths and Limitations of the Approach

A key emphasis of the IDPoor programme has been to use identification procedures that maximise implementation by government structures and village representatives, in order to build local capacity and enhance sustainability. However, this emphasis requires a significant amount of training, which is relatively costly. It is anticipated that training costs will decline in future years as commune and village representatives become more experienced in the process (assuming that turnover of implementers is not too high).

The identification procedures also involve a high degree of participation by and consultation with villagers. This increases the transparency of the process and the accuracy of the results, and therefore the acceptability to local people and data users. However, it also makes the process more complex and time-consuming.

A likely positive side-effect is the strengthening of democratic values in communities, such as increasing local leaders' concern about the welfare of their constituents and their degree of accountability to them; public involvement in community affairs; and enhancing consultation and transparency in decision making.

While the use of the standardised questionnaire makes results more comparable from one location to another, it may be that not all questions will be fully applicable in all areas and among all ethnic groups and livelihood types, which may make it necessary to modify the questionnaire as experience is gained.

The use of the questionnaire by VRG members introduces a challenging degree of complexity, but with training and guidance, VRGs have proven capable of using it. Due to strong community pressures to include people on the list, the questionnaire is important to promote objectivity and fairness in determining poverty.

Database of Poor Households

A database of poor households has been developed to support identification and to generate data for dissemination to service providers. The database was developed in Cambodia and is bilingual (Khmer and English). It is designed so that data can be entered in different locations and then consolidated nationally. In areas covered by the MOP, the provincial departments enter the data. The MOP also makes the database freely available to partner organisations to enable them to enter data in their own coverage areas. The intention is to consolidate data from areas covered by the MOP and by partner organisations, and make this data available to all interested service providers, in order to maximise the cost-effectiveness of data collection.

What Kind of Data Are Available?

The programme can provide different types of data for use by government, non-government organisations and sector programmes and projects to target services and development assistance to the poor. These include:

- The original handwritten list of poor households on paper, a copy of which remains in the village and at the commune office, which is available as soon as communes have approved the list (before data entry).
- Database-generated reports, including:
  - List of poor households, which includes the name and sex of household head, spouse name, poverty level.
  - Profile of household members, with sex, age, year of birth, relationship to head of household; poverty level.
  - Poverty rate comparison report: the percentage of poor level 1, poor level 2 and all poor households in each village in the coverage area. This report can also analyse poverty rates in terms of the number of people.
  - Summary statistics for coverage area: median percentage of poor level 1, poor level 2 and total poor households in villages covered; median percentage of poor level 1, poor level 2 and total poor persons in villages covered; percentage of male- and female-headed households in each poverty category.
  - List of names and photos of poor household members: thumbnail household photos; poverty level; names, sex and year of birth of all household members, printed in a handy format for reference. This is particularly useful for local service providers who do not have easy access to computers.
- Full database of poor households, including photos of poor households and details of all household members, with the ability to generate reports based on user selection of parameters.

For Which Areas Are Data Available?

Data from round 1 of identification of poor households, conducted in the second half of 2007, are now available for the whole of Kratie province (Kratie and Chhloung operational districts) and Siem Reap (Soutr Nikom and Kralanh ODs).

Data from round 2, in the first half of 2008, will be available about September-October 2008. These data include Angkor Chum and Siem Reap ODs of Siem Reap province; the whole of Oddar Meanchey; Cheung Prey/ Batheay, Chamkar Leu/Stung Trang and Prey Chhor/ Kang Meas ODs in Kompong Cham; and Pea Reang and Preah Sdach ODs in Prey Veng.