

DECENTRALISATION AND POVERTY ALLEVIATION IN RURAL GHANA: PERSPECTIVES FROM DISTRICT ELITES AND VOICES OF THE RURAL POOR

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Abstract

Decentralisation of government has been a major policy direction of the World Bank and - International Monetary Fund (IMF) as an adjunct to the Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP) imposed on low income countries. The emphasis in SAPs on the reduction of public spending has increased poverty in many cases. This has led to the growth of a new emphasis on decentralisation and participatory development in an attempt to reduce poverty .The link between participation and local governance has become seen as an important means of improving the effectiveness of services and of empowering the poor to participate in the development processes that affect their lives. Based on empirical study of a district in Ghana, this paper argues that there are perception gaps between the elites and rural poor with respect to poverty and poverty alleviation strategies. It also suggests that the poor are rendered anonymous in the design of poverty alleviation programmes. The paper also notes that the voices of the poor in the study district are unanimous in one respect: poverty alleviation programmes under the District Assemblies (DAs) have hardly affected them.

Introduction

After over a decade of stabilisation and adjustment programmes in the low income countries of sub-Saharan Africa, poverty continues to be of critical concern and a formidable challenge. The harsh impact of these programmes has prompted a new emphasis on popular participation through decentralisation in recent years.

The growing apparent shift from top-down to bottom-up approaches to development in Ghana, (as in other low income countries) has been occasioned by a number of features: centralisation of state apparatus and the failure of development projects, increasing rural poverty and political changes (particularly the demands of international organisations for good governance as a conditionality for loans). Decentralisation is perceived as a means of limiting the functions of central government and strengthening service provision at the sub national level (OECD, 1997:23). The demands of structural adjustment for reductions in state expenditure have also encouraged the devolution of authority and functions to local governments with consequent opportunities for empowerment of local groups. There is a growing emphasis on the role of indigenous, grassroots, and Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) in Ghana (as elsewhere in Africa) in addition to local government.

In 1988 the governing Provisional National Defence Council of Ghana put in place an administrative and political structure that aimed to support a greater degree of popular participation in rural development. Power has been devolved to District Assemblies to enhance service delivery for poverty alleviation, and since 1992 the government has channelled not less than 5% of national revenue to these Assemblies for development. The District Assemblies (Local Government bodies in Ghana) are now the fulcrum of political and administrative authority in Ghana.

One of the main issues this paper is set to examine is the fact that those who define poverty and then formulate poverty reduction policies for that designated population have no lived experience of poverty. This study examines the lived experiences of the rural poor, and the extent to which the strategy of popular participation through decentralisation has brought them into the decision-making processes involved in alleviating poverty. The paper examines the perception of the district elites in the District Assembly and of the rural poor on poverty and poverty alleviation. It draws on research conducted in 1998 on decentralisation and poverty alleviation in Adansi West district of Ashanti region in Ghana. Participatory approaches were employed to explore the perspectives of district elites and the rural poor on poverty and poverty alleviation under the decentralised system of Ghana.

The concept of decentralisation

Decentralisation is an 'omnibus' word widely used by practising politicians, administrators and academics with many different meanings. Much ambiguity, therefore, surrounds the concept (Turner and Hulme, 1997:152; Wittenhall, 1996:24) and it is not easily defined (Conyers, 1983b; Mawhood, 1983; Rondinelli et al., 1984; Litvac et al., 1998). However Rondinelli, Nellis and Cheema (1984:9) provide one widely accepted definition of decentralisation as the transfer of the responsibility for planning, decision-making, or administrative authority from central government to its field organisations. Koehn (1995:72) maintains that 'fundamentally genuine

decentralisation involves the process of transferring power' .Decentralisation takes many forms: several dimensions and several variants may be operating at the same time within a country, or even within a sector (Litvac et al., 1998:4).

Rondinelli et al., (1984:10) have distinguished four major forms of decentralisation. These are primarily determined by the extent to which the authority to plan, decide and manage is transferred from the central government to other organisations and the amount of autonomy the 'decentralised organisations' achieve in carrying out their tasks. The four forms of decentralisation identified are deconcentration, delegation to semi-autonomous or parastatal agencies, transfer of functions from public to non-governmental institutions and devolution. In Ghana, political authority has been devolved to the District Assemblies with management, decision-making responsibilities, formulation of policies and the enactment of by-laws for the area.

Decentralisation and poverty alleviation The conceptualisation and measurement of poverty are complex issues. It defies precise definition and in general remains the notion of 'lack of or 'deficiency' (Rahnema, 1996). Traditionally, poverty has been defined in terms of consumption or income, undertaken through survey-based measurement (White, 1998:1). A commonly used income definition is subsisting on US\$ 1 per day or less. However, it must be noted that the priorities and perceptions of the poor are rarely examined or 'amplified'. Effectiveness in poverty alleviation will be greater if the assessment addresses issues the poor identify as constituting poverty. ' If the poor are viewed as statistics, figures and ciphers, then the policy that is formulated to alleviate poverty will, in all likelihood, follow suit and be more relevant to manipulation of statistics than to needs of people' (Beck, 1994:6).

The sustained interest in decentralisation (notwithstanding its varied problems), since independence in Africa, is an indication that, in principle, it holds promise to involve local people in the development process. So, for example, problems of neglected areas or of diverse ethnic groups can be better addressed. Decentralisation may empower minorities and vulnerable groups to get involved in the development process at the local level (De Wit, 1997:3). Rondinelli (1981:136), for example, argues that: 'by creating alternative means of decision-making, decentralisation can offset the influence or control over development activities by entrenched local elites who are often unsympathetic to national policies and insensitive to the needs of the poor groups in rural communities'.

There are significant arguments against this, however. Conyers (1985:36 cited in Khan, ~ 1988:27) has noted that decentralisation may not alleviate rural poverty, especially if captured by local elites.

The ambiguity around whether decentralisation helps the rural poor is due to the fact that policy makers and bureaucrats continue to exercise control and dominate the development agenda. There is little inclination towards involvement of the rural poor in the development process. However, 'there is reason to expect that, over time, poor groups may become better able to exert political leverage within democratic authorities at lower levels' (Manor, 1997:2). Manor is of the opinion that 'when it works well, decentralisation has much to recommend it' and points to its particular value in assisting remote, underdeveloped and under-represented sub-regions.

According to Litvac et al. (1998: 1), the World Bank is of the opinion that institutional development is critical to poverty reduction. Strengthened government institutions at the

central and local levels are needed to improve the capability for analysis and programme implementation, especially for poverty reduction (Litvac et al., 1998:40). Litvac et al (1998:2) stated: one reason decentralisation has attracted so much attention is that it is often a cross-cutting reform that can relate to such important Bank concerns, as the relation between fiscal development; micro-economic stability; poverty alleviation and the social safety-net institutional capacity, corruption and governance; investment in infrastructure; and the provision of social services'.

An analysis of older case studies of decentralisation in Africa by Rondinelli and Cheema (1983:100) suggested that services provision barely increased and most of the decentralised organisations did not prove to be viable mechanisms for popular participation. As a consequence, many poverty alleviation programmes presently focus on the empowerment of the poor (Rondinelli and Cheema, 1983:100). The urgent question is whether this new round of decentralisation encouraged by the World Bank will be of more positive benefit to the marginalised, underprivileged and excluded.

Decentralisation in Ghana

Decentralisation as a government policy in Ghana has a chequered history with its roots dating back to the late 1940s during the colonial rule. Decentralisation during the colonial period in Ghana was characterised by mere deconcentration of central administrative structure. In this way the colonial government consolidated its control over the entire nation. There was no conscious effort at devolution of power and involvement of the rural people in the decision-making process. Post-independence governments have never deviated from the practice of central control and use of local government for their political advantage. It would appear that poverty alleviation in rural Ghana through the local government structure has not been a principal objective in the colonial and post-independence periods. The needs of the rural poor never seem to have occupied a central position in the development programmes of governments in Ghana.

The 1988 decentralisation programme of the Rawlings regime was received with enthusiasm and it awakened the spirit of self-help and 'awareness' among communities. The District Assemblies are physically closer to the people and their development problems than central government so that the assembly members should, theoretically, routinely identify their problems and attempt to solve them. It was initiated 'to promote popular grassroots participation in the administration of the various areas concerned from the stand points of planning, implementation, monitoring and delivery of those services which go to improve the living conditions of the people and the orderly, fair and balanced development of the whole country' (Ghana, 1996:7).

Communities accepted the fact that they were responsible for the development of their areas. The District Assembly concept initially (1989-1992) generated patriotism not only among the rural population but the Assembly members. In some of the most deprived districts in Ghana such as Tolon/Kunbungu and Zabugu/Tatale in the Northern Region, Kwahu North in the Eastern Region and Nadowli, in Upper West Region, assembly members decided to forgo their allowances for the cause of development in their districts (Ayee, 1993: 129).

The government has noted that deliberate and concerted efforts will be made to eradicate the economic, social, cultural and political factors that contribute to mass poverty in the country,

within the framework of sustainable rural development (NDPC, 1995:8). In order to effectively undertake poverty alleviation activities, District Assemblies will be required to co-ordinate district level sectoral programmes/projects directed towards poverty alleviation, with support of donors, Non-governmental Organisations and Community-Based Organisations and private sector enterprises (Ghana, 1996:77).

Structure and Key features of Decentralisation in Ghana

The specific features are as follows:

- . A three-tier structure, consisting of Regional Co-ordinating Councils (RCC), District Assemblies and Town/Area Councils and Unit Committees.
- . The District Assembly (DA) is the basic unit of government as well as the statutory, deliberative and legislative body for the determination of broad policy objectives and critical assessment of development progress. It is the highest political authority in the district.
- . The DAs comprise of 70% elected members; members of Parliament whose constituencies fall within the area of authority of the DAs as non voting members; the District Chief Executive (DCE) -the appointed chief representative of the central government in the district; 30% of the total membership of the DAs appointed by the President in consultation with traditional authorities and interest groups.
- . The DAs elect one of its members as the Presiding member who presides over meetings of the DAs.
- . The Assembly functions through the Executive Committee (on which up to 1/3 members of the assembly may serve) and its subsidiary committees. Each Assembly member must belong to at least one committee.
- . 22 departments and organisations have been placed under the DAs to provide technical and managerial back-up.
- . Movement from top-down to bottom-up planning and composite budgeting system, which has yet to materialise.
- . The main sources of finance comprise local taxation and the novel District Assembly Common Fund, a constitutionally guaranteed not less than 5% of total government collected revenue. It is shared by a revenue sharing formula approved by parliament. A third source is the 'ceded revenue', under which the central government cedes to the DAs the right to receive certain taxes which were hitherto collected by the centre.

There is no doubt, therefore, that the current local government system in Ghana is a comprehensive administrative system in which functions, powers, responsibilities and resources could be transferred to the central government units, that is the District Assemblies. Furthermore, it provides an elaborate framework for the enhancement of popular participation at the local level and also provides machinery for economic and social development.

Voices of the rural poor

For many decades poverty has been defined and categorised by those who have never been affected by it. 'They apply top-down schemes to elicit data that fit into preset boxes' (Chambers and Conway, 1992:4). These concepts and measurements fail to capture the complex and diverse realities of rural life, and account for the many failures of intervention programmes. Poverty is an extremely complex issue, multi-dimensional and multi-layered in nature. It is therefore important to consult those affected by poverty so they can unwrap the complex issues involved.

The section below dwells on the voices of the rural people who are the best judge of their experiences and the solutions to their problems. Communities are best placed to determine their own priorities and implement programmes, seeking to improve their well-being and security in a sustainable way (Korboe, 1998).

The concept of poverty as perceived by rural communities

Rural people in the study villages in Adansi West district brought to the fore the differences in wealth, well-being and poverty (see table 1.1). They were not obsessed with monetary deprivation alone, but also referred to social factors which are equally important and relevant to understanding poverty in rural Ghana.

In Adansi West district (Ashanti Region), rural communities perceive poverty as an individual's inability to obtain gainful employment in order to secure enough income to care for the family, having very small or no land, laziness, ill-health, disability, inability to clothe oneself or contributing to community needs and being ignored and not listened to. The concepts of wealth and well-being were described by the people in terms of individual employment status (economic activity), income, health, physical assets, such as land, sheep, cattle, bicycle, cars etc., ability to save, help community development and other people, adequately care for the family in terms of provision of food, shelter, clothing, access to social services -water, education, health and sanitation etc. (see table 1.1).

Table 1.1 Criteria for Poverty, Wealth and Well-being in Adansi West District.

<i>Wealth</i>	<i>Well-Being</i>	<i>Poverty</i>
<i>Ownership of good land (for cereals, cocoa, food crops, etc.)</i>	<i>Have money</i>	<i>Unemployed</i>
<i>Ownership of cattle, sheep, goats, poultry</i>	<i>Being in good health</i>	<i>Disabled</i>
<i>Ownership of Buildings</i>	<i>Not being disabled</i>	<i>Unhealthy</i>
<i>Having children and/or relatives abroad who remit regularly</i>	<i>Take good care of family</i>	<i>Inability to take good care of family</i>
<i>Ownership of consumer durables like cars, motorbikes, fridges, bicycles,</i>	<i>Having one's peace in the environment</i>	<i>Hungry most of the time</i>

<i>etc.</i>		
<i>Ability to afford good clothes</i>		<i>Not being listened to</i>
<i>Being philanthropic</i>		<i>Being lazy</i>

Source: Focus Group Discussion -Adansi West District (not in rank order)

It is important to note that in the Adansi West District, all the village communities identified various categories of poverty:

1. Very poor -'*ohiani*' -those who are unable to work and earn income and therefore cannot afford basic necessities and services and have to depend on others for their livelihood (that is the disabled, chronically sick and aged).

2. Those in hardship -'*ahokyereni*' (unemployed or underemployed in low paid casual labour).

3. Those with productive assets, able to manage and afford basic necessities, such as shelter, clothing and at least two meals a day -'*osikani*'.

People in this area hold the view that if they do not fall within the first category they are capable of coming out of their hardships with perseverance.

The disabled, chronically ill, and the aged in this poor '*ohiani*' category are cared for by their relatives, without any help from the Government's Social Welfare Department. These include the disabled, the mentally retarded, the unhealthy, old men and women, widows without sources of income and orphans. They have to be fed, clothed and medically provided for by their relatives. A middle aged man explained with sorrow: 'do you want to know what poverty is, do you hope to see one? Then I represent poverty. Leprosy has made me dependent on other people throughout my life. I am not lazy or weak but I cannot do anything now, I represent poverty'.

The very poor, *ohiani*, may also include the landless, especially migrant farmers who do not own land. Many people have only a small parcel of land for their farming activities, the youth migrate to the district capital and the cities for employment opportunities, and others travel outside the country .

Those within the hardship category , *ahokyereni*, are the subsistence farmers who are not able to expand their farms for financial reasons. They may also have very little land for farming activities. Such people do not have access to agricultural extension assistance, which local , people perceive to be an important aspect in agricultural development. The older people in the

focus group discussion stated they had had access in the past. Most people in this hardship category are underemployed and live on low paid casual labour -'by-day' labour -which provides a wage of about a pound sterling a day if available. They are, therefore, unable to save but are able to meet their barest basic needs of food, clothing and shelter. These '*ahokyerere*' category people are also referred to as "*from hand to mouth*", meaning that they consume whatever they earn without any ability to save.

Between the rich (those able to manage and afford basic necessities such as shelter, clothing and two meals a day) and those in hardship, another category was identified by the people as '*mmodenbofo*' -the hardworking. These are men and women who, in the face of limited

resources, work hard to get themselves out of the poverty trap. They could be regarded as 'innovative' because they undertake many jobs and are able to move into areas of opportunity in both farm and non-farm activities not easily perceived by others. By dint of hardwork, they crawl out of poverty. Such people are ahead of those suffering hardship but are yet to move into the rich bracket.

In Adansi West district, lazy people were perceived to be poor people. They idle about even if they have access to productive assets. Others in this category of the lazy include the alcoholics and drug addicts who become a burden on their families. People in the villages don't seem to have patience with such people but a woman noted, 'there is nothing we can do; we have to care for all such people -they are also human beings'. Rural people, especially relatives, friends and neighbours, are prepared to take responsibility for those they consider very poor. It is important to note though the distinction between the poor and the lazy. Not all poor people are lazy but the villagers maintain that there are people who should have moved out of poverty, considering the resources at their disposal. But because of laziness they are not able to make it and they are known in the community, even though their attitude is not openly discussed.

Asikafo -there are others in the communities who have been able to accumulate or inherit landed property (wealth). They are perceived by the people as gainfully employed, with money, and are able to care for their family and, therefore, rich. They are used as a reference point for wealth and well-being. These well-off people have well educated children and some of the children are supported to do business in the commercial sector. Many men in this category have more than one wife. They are able to give freely towards community development projects in the town/village, give to church harvests and to the needy in the village. '*Asikafo*' are generally described as being able to feed and clothe their children properly, and live in good houses which will be bequeathed to their dependants (Afenyadu et al, 1996; Korboe, 1998; Norton et al, 1995). Very few in this category could be named in the study villages.

It is important to note that poverty was perceived by men, women and the youth in the same way. What was significant was that there was a general consensus that poverty affected women more than men. And they transmit the disadvantages more readily to children, thus perpetuating the poverty cycle. Nonetheless women are considered better able than men to protect children from the consequences of poverty.

District elites and their perceptions of Poverty

We need to examine the elite's perception and understanding of poverty because how they conceptualise and describe the poor will shape the potential solutions to poverty they identify under the decentralised system.

The elites in this study are the dominant, influential and powerful in the district -those who have direct influence on policy which affects poverty levels. It includes the bureaucrats and the politicians who interact within the framework of the District Assembly for the realisation of certain set goals.

Bureaucrats have an important role because effective administration is clearly a vital ingredient in the development of the district. They constitute an important arm of government intervention in the rural areas (Wallis, 1989:79). Politically, the District Chief Executives have

been appointed by the President and wield enormous political power and influence in their districts. The appointed members of the Assembly have been selected by the President, in consultation with chiefs and interest groups in the district, in theory, for their expertise and abilities to help in the development efforts of the district. The elected members have the mandate of their people in the electoral areas and are held in high esteem. In the decentralised system of power and decision making, political leaders have assumed a significant role as vital links between the government and the people. They are supposed to articulate the needs and aspirations of the people and effectively relate them to policy making and the developmental programmes, thus acquiring a critical position in the system (Chaturvedi, 1977:9).

Educational and social background

All bureaucrats in both districts have had a university education. The District Co-ordinating Directors and their immediate deputies, for example, have post graduate degrees in public administration. It is evident that, as expected, people entering the administrative and technical class have the minimum qualifications prescribed for recruitment.

In politics, however, there is no prescribed qualification and there are far fewer educationally qualified people who become leaders in the district. The majority have elementary school education. The presiding member has had university education and is a retired former Deputy Director of Education in Brong Ahafo region.

Another important aspect of social background relevant to this study is the rural/urban exposure of political leaders and the bureaucrats. As a consequence of their educational background, the majority of the bureaucrats have spent most of their lives in urban areas. This is because most secondary and post secondary schools are located in the urban centres. There is also a heavy concentration of government services in the urban areas and urban-oriented training exacerbates this problem. All tertiary institutions are also located in the cities. Even though, culturally, every Ghanaian has ancestral roots in a village, most educated people live the greater part of their lives in the urban centres. All the bureaucrats interviewed have worked only in urban centres or towns which are district capitals. The majority of political leaders, however, especially Assembly members, now live in the rural areas and are retired officers, teachers, health workers, farmers and traders. These have also had considerable urban exposure.

Elite perceptions of poverty

There is no doubt that the backgrounds of the district elite, described above, have important influences on their perception of poverty. Poverty was generally perceived by this district elite lack of basic necessities of life. These include shelter, education, health, clothing and ability to afford three meals a day. It was also perceived as inability to engage in 'decent' employment for income to enable one to care for the family like payment of school fees and hospital bills (see table 1.2), and as those who are below the poverty line as set by the Ghana Statistical Service in the Ghana Living Standard Survey documents.

Table 1.2: Perception by the District Administration officials and political leaders in Adansi West.

Respondents Meaning of Poverty

Respondents	Meaning of Poverty
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District Co-Ordinating Director	Lack of basic necessities of life: shelter, food, clothes, clean water, health, education, etc. One does not have them and cannot have them because of one's peculiar circumstances.
District Chief Executive	Unable to enjoy basic necessities of life-shelter, food, good drinking, water, health facilities, etc. Lack of employment. Not able to make ends meet, resulting in limited choices.
Assembly members (appointed and elected : male and female)	Lack of basic amenities of life such as clean water, health facilities, food, shelter, etc. Unemployment : lack of income to care for one and family and to afford basic necessities of life. Employment but may earn so little as not to make choices.
Other district officers : planning/budget officers and other Department heads	Lack of basic amenities in life such as food, shelter

Source: Focus group discussion and in-depth interviews in study district. 1998.

Interviews with other Assembly members reveal a similar pattern, which confirm their promises to the electorate if voted to power. Their ambition in their tenure of office in the Assembly is to 'fight' for one of the social services in villages; an essential action if they are , to continue in the Assembly. ,

There is no doubt that, having trained and lived in the urban setting for a considerable period of their lives, they want to see those social amenities available in the urban areas made available in the rural areas. The elites define poverty as a lack of provision of social services infrastructure. Investments in social services and infrastructure are high on the agenda of the elites. The creation of employment to improve the economic base of the poor is seen as of secondary importance.

It must be noted that poverty and well-being, as perceived by the rural people is multi-dimensional and does not correspond with this measure. So the analysis of poverty issues has been narrowed by the elites to what can be measured. Only one dimension of poverty is assessed when there are so many. Chambers (1997:46) maintains that: 'the simple definition of the bad condition -poverty -is made, then, not by the poor, from their experience, but by the 'well-off, (elite) for their convenience. Planners' and academics' need for a single scale of numbers narrows, distorts and simplifies their perception' .f\

The elites justify their claim for appraising the needs of the poor on the grounds that it provides the planners with a 'scientific' basis for their anti-poverty planning. This largely ignores the location, condition, perceptions and priorities of the poor themselves and is enough to indicate the bureaucratic and highly ineffective nature of the exercise. Rahnema

(1996) has noted that "after separating the poor person's 'needs' from him as an active and living human being, it reduces him to only an inadequate ingredient of economic growth".

The perception gap between the elites and poor

There is a perception gap between the elite and rural poor which obstructs positive change for the poor. This has three facets:

- a) The political gap: the elites fail to recognise the crucial importance of power relations in the poverty issue. The poor in the villages studied in Adansi West districts established the fact that powerlessness and voicelessness are, in part, facets of poverty. The poor, therefore, seek to be heard and participate in the decision making process. They want their voices to be amplified in the policy arena of the District Assemblies. This would make them active contributors to the development process and give meaning and form to participation: not only ~' as beneficiaries but initiators, implementers and owners. People in the villages studied maintained that "no one listening to you" is one of the important dimensions of poverty. Distribution of power in the rural areas is rarely considered by the elite, putting the poor into a powerless position. This means that the poor lack the capacity to bring about an alteration in the behaviour and actions of others or to influence events. They are rather the objects of power (Kiros, 1985).
- b) The economic gap: the elites define poverty by the income/consumption standard, hence being obsessed with poverty lines, which oversimplifies the challenge of poverty reduction. A poverty line is drawn, being the minimal amount of money needed to keep a person out of poverty , and the numbers of people who fall below this line can then be ascertained (White, 1998). This, according to the elite, enables precise quantitative assessment of the poverty problem but it clearly reveals the inadequate knowledge they have about the rural environment. This is because the rural poor not only require money but voice to air their priorities, peace of mind and food security. The ideas of the elite on poverty have also been shaped by national policies. The Central Government's links with international organisations like the World Bank has profound influence on the state's perception of poverty. The World Bank focuses mainly on poverty lines but poverty, as discussed above, involves not just economics but also power and voice to the poor.
- c) The social gap: The elites have lost sight of the fact that people interact with each other within a group or community .Within the rural areas, community life and dependency links tend to be very high. The disabled, the old, the infirm, the young, orphaned, social misfits and chronically disturbed are not neglected by the rural poor. Even the 'disreputable poor' -the lazy, beggars and alcoholics -are cared for. The elites do not normally concern themselves with these social obligations in the villages, but live with the reductionist approach which tries to comprehend a complex phenomenon in terms of only one dimension. In these villages there are virtually no social welfare services to support the poor people.

One therefore sees a great gulf between policy makers and policy 'objects' (the poor) with little sign of convergence. The perspectives of the elite fail to capture the social and power relations of any kind. Poverty is perceived almost exclusively as economic, with a token concern for gender inequalities and experiences of poverty as powerlessness, vulnerability, isolation, etc.

The rural poor in the study district, as might be expected, provide a more embracing, insightful, realistic, integrated and multi-dimensional view of poverty than the elite. These perspectives of the elite are reflected in practical terms, however, when we look at what the District Assemblies have been doing about poverty alleviation in the next section.

Elites perspectives on strategies to alleviate poverty

The design and ultimate implementation of poverty alleviation programmes is shaped and directed by the understanding of poverty among those designing and implementing the programmes. Such perceptions of poverty determine the appropriate strategies selected to eradicate it (Mullen, 1996:90). The District Assembly is the foremost decentralised political institution responsible for identifying poverty problems at the local level and for implementing policies and strategies that address the problems. Kwamena Ahwoi, the Minister for Local Government and Rural Development (1992:51) noted that: 'Development must be seen in terms of how well you have been able to contain poverty in your districts; how well you have been able to create or generate employment; and in purely physical terms, whether you have been able to improve the quality of life of your people with the provision of basic educational facilities, good drinking water, community facilities and services such as improved sanitation facilities for up-grading housing units, increased access to health facilities, improved roads and conscious creation of awareness among the people for appreciation of their social and economic responsibilities'.

The ministry emphasises the tangible aspects of the strategy. The overriding objective of the District Assemblies, therefore, is to transform the social lives of the people through the provision of social services and infrastructure. This was emphasised by the Deputy Minister for Local Government and Rural Development, Johnson (1997): 'The government has allocated 116 billion cedis in this year's budget to finance programmes which will significantly contribute to poverty reduction. Some of the programmes are education, (formal and informal) primary health care and rural infrastructure'.

An assembly member noted that: 'Before we are voted to power we make the people aware that we are capable of 'fighting' for social services that are lacking in the villages. This is the trend of politics we have inherited and if the people are satisfied that you are able to deliver, they vote for you. So I do all my best to make sure that my election promises are fulfilled else I am in trouble' (1998).

The District Assembly, therefore, has as its poverty alleviation strategy: the provision of social services and infrastructure, which are basically lacking in rural areas and which show such differences between rural and urban areas. Projects undertaken by the District Assemblies include the construction and maintenance of feeder roads, school classroom blocks, clinics and provision of water, electricity and Kumasi Ventilated Improved Pit latrines (KVIPs). The livelihood of the people is still not high on their agenda.

What the District Assembly has consistently failed to recognise is the fact that the push to provide social services is not matched with efforts to ensure accessibility by the poor people. The provision of these social services to some extent becomes a blessing and at the same time a curse: a blessing because the people appreciate the fact that there has been a relative increase in the number of projects in the districts even though they are not evenly distributed.

A curse because they are not easily accessible to the poor people. This can be seen with reference to basic social services.

Health and education

The current cost recovery system of the government, resulting from Structural Adjustment Programmes, is laden with a myriad of hidden costs such as travelling costs in rural areas to health centres, under the counter payment to receive medical services, and the non-exemption of those who officially should be exempted from paying health care services. This has made the cost of orthodox medical consultation very high. Most of the rural people, therefore, rely on herbalists and only occasionally go to clinics. A woman summed it all: 'the hospital fees and drugs are so expensive that in most cases you have to depend on traditional medicine with your children. People even do away with their prescription because they just cannot afford to purchase the drugs' .

In all the villages studied in the district there were many children of school going age who were not in school. Parents are not able to afford the cost of education despite the government's 'Free Compulsory Universal Basic Education policy.' A parent lamented: 'Getting a child to school which they say it is free means the cost of uniforms, books, furniture and development fees which is far from easy and even impossible for some of us to pay'.

Predictably, large numbers of children drop out of school owing to the inability of their parents to finance their educational needs. Cost sharing in education and its consequences for the poor involves more than tuition. While tuition fees may be kept low or even eliminated for primary school, parents are often asked to pay fees for school development funds, exercise books, uniforms, personal equipment, and to provide in-kind services for the construction and maintenance of primary schools (Adams and Hartnett, 1996:23).

Whereas the Ghana Living Standard Survey findings suggested an improvement in basic education, measured by the increase in physical school structures (the pride of the District Assemblies as a success of the decentralisation programme), the Participatory Poverty Assessment (Korboe, 1994; Norton et al., 1995) pointed out conclusively that the quality of education was declining. This was attributed partly to the fact that while there has been an increase in physical structures, and possibly in school attendance rates, this has not been accompanied by an equal increase in training of more teachers, leading to high teacher pupil ratios in the villages.

Producing the desired impact on the health, education, water and sanitation of the rural poor goes beyond construction projects. Buildings do not produce quality care, high education standards, income for easy access to the services and above all avenues for the voice of the poor to be heard in the policy arena. Concern for improving the quality of education will prove elusive unless the government, through the District Assemblies, improves the provision of textbooks, teachers and other inputs, and most importantly access to the rural poor.

The District Assemblies have not been able to reach poor communities and specific social groups within those communities (differentiated by gender, income, age etc.) and to do so in a manner that responds to the needs and priorities of the poor. Care for the poor has, therefore, been generally carried out by institutions of kinship or community.

The Rural Poor and Poverty alleviation strategies - The rural people in the study district see the root to the solution of the poverty problem as enhancement of their livelihood, an issue the District Assemblies have ignored. They are rather committed to the alleviation of poverty through community level provision of social services even though these are not easily accessible to the people. Poor farmers find it difficult to have access to such inputs as cutlass, seeds, fertiliser, insecticides and extension services, the cost of which are very high because of privatisation resulting from the Structural Adjustment Programmes. Marketing is also a problem for them. The District Assemblies do not have their livelihood as their priority as middle aged man in Akrokerri appropriately noted: 'Poverty? the District Assembly has done nothing about it, we have to struggle to get out of poverty ourselves. I have used my physical strength all my life in farming without any help (credit facilities and inputs) to expand my farm and harvest more for sale. At the moment none of my children is in this village -they have gone to the city to work. They hate farming because of the problems we have gone through. If we villagers are helped to expand our farms and get more money we could provide good school buildings, toilets etc. for our villages. After all we have been contributing for a long time to cater for our community needs. Tell them we need help to expand our farms' (interview, Adansi West District, 1998).

Chambers et al (1992:6-8) define livelihood in its simplest form as a means of gaining a living. The main livelihood activities in the district come from arable farming, small scale agro-processing and petty trading. Teachers and other government workers (and miners in Adansi West district) as well as traders engage in agricultural activities in addition to their full time jobs (food security) before marketing the remaining to improve income and wealth accumulation. Women were particularly keen on credit to start/expand their off-farm economic activities.

Rural men mainly sought agrochemicals, tools, extension services or know-how/skills and credit for the expansion of farms. They were concerned about increased productivity at farm level. There is overwhelming evidence from field interviews that communities lack access to, and control of, vital production inputs and face a range of other constraints to improve their livelihood. These include: lack of access to land, micro-capital for simple machines for processing crops, good agricultural tools and start-up capital especially for women. There are also marketing problems -post harvest prices are low and there is a lack of powerful negotiating bodies to face the strong city-based market queens, who take advantage of the rural sellers through their powerful networks, to offer them lower prices. Virtually unmotorable roads during the rainy season are another problem which leaves only few vehicles, if any, to ply such roads with high fares. Higher farm gate prices and improved marketing could be two of the best means to help rural farmers, though these are complex issues. Persistent outmigration of the rural youth partly due to lack of access to wage opportunities in the villages is also a problem in the district.

In some communities, labour intensive smallholder agriculture is similarly undermined by the poor health and nutritional status of the farming populations (Korboe, 1998).

Future Prospects

As the foregoing discussion has shown, the District Assemblies have failed to view development and poverty alleviation holistically because they have put projects instead of people first. The rural areas have not seen themselves as partners in the development

process. It is, therefore, not surprising that the bureaucratic intervention from the District Assemblies has not had its desired impact on poverty .

The issues outlined above raise an important question as to whether there is any scope for improving the current decentralisation programme to benefit the rural poor. The following recommendations are made for effective partnership between the DAs and the rural poor in poverty alleviation in Ghana.

a) Identification of the poor

The study has shown that the poor must be identified by themselves and encouraged to choose policies that can help them most, given the available resources. Information on the socio- economic characteristics of the poor and the population as a whole is crucial. Given the political will to confront poverty , one of the most important tasks is to gather accurate information on the poor from the poor. It is important to have a district poverty-focused data set, which expresses the voice of the people in its communities. It must be noted that enhanced and stabilised financial resources of Assemblies will, by and large, depend on the growing strength of the rural economy. It is in this light that immediate action on the perceived solutions to poverty by the rural poor is imperative.

b) Livelihood sources

This reinforces already held views that a prosperous agriculture is the engine without which poverty cannot be eradicated and food security cannot be assured (World Bank, 1996b: 20). Agriculture, the largest sector in the rural economy and the enterprise which sustains the socio-economic life of the rural population, must be given serious attention if poverty is to be alleviated. This study recommends that if the poor are to be reached and their lives bettered, agricultural development must be pursued in tandem with other livelihood strategies such as support for cottage or agro-based industrial activities. Pursuing such policies could strengthen the rural economic sector and widen the taxable resource base for the Assemblies. Serious cognisance must be taken of the fact that in rural Ghana, poor people's access to better health, education, etc, depends on raising employment incomes (Lipton, 1999:184) through widening their livelihood sources. Such a people-centred development strategy in the rural areas will promote grassroots initiatives and encourage real participation, shape the sense of responsibility of the rural people and foster links with the DAs.

c) Rural Women

Related to this area of development, emphasis must be given to rural women in the development process under the DAs. This condition prevails to varying degrees in the study districts. Poverty is gender biased and women continue to suffer in deplorable rural conditions. It is, therefore, surprising that the District Assembly has no special programme for women to assist in ameliorating their economic and cultural conditions. DAs need to give special priority to women and their activities, though such action needs careful planning. Lip-service continues to be paid to enhancing the lives of women. Women in Ghana form an estimated 52% of agricultural labour force and produce 70% of subsistence crops. Women also constitute 90% of the labour force in the marketing of farm produce (NDPC, 1994 cited in Duncan, 1997:1).

d) *District poverty alleviation plan*

One key focus is the problem of identifying the poor in order to know who are more needy and in what area of their lives. Research and data on various categories of the poor should be compiled in each district if rural poverty programmes are to be more effective. Programmes need to take into account the perspectives of the poor on poverty and its alleviation, and these views need to be incorporated into a District Poverty Alleviation Plan. If development programmes are undertaken in a transparent and open manner, focusing on the felt needs of the poor and their priorities, it would be easier to get the trust and involvement of the rural poor for successful poverty alleviation programmes.

e) *Building capacity at sub-district level.*

Central government and district bureaucrats have received, and continue to receive, traditional didactic, top-down training to equip them for local government. Very little training beyond orientation has been given to the District Assembly Members. Training has to be linked closely to the internal change processes if it is to have a lasting impact (Thompson, 1995:1523). Reforms to achieve popular participation must, therefore, expose bureaucrats to people-centred approaches in training such as participatory rural appraisal approaches. The content of training programmes should address practical rural problems. Bureaucrats and politicians need to be exposed to the realities of rural life. Capacity building must also go beyond the district to the sub-districts. Central and local government and donor communities could concentrate more effort on building the capacity of the rural people at the village unit level who have 'governed' themselves in the face of harsh economic and environmental realities since the colonial era. Teams of leaders at the unit level could be identified and trained so they can mobilise the people to make legitimate demands on the DA.

f) *Mobilisation of the rural poor*

The rural poor lack power and voice and they are geographically dispersed with limited transport and communication. They cannot spontaneously organise themselves and so may require an outside catalyst agency to promote their organisation (Khan, 1988:35). Mobilisation of the rural people could be done through the traditional community organisations. Their development into organs of independent, strong community action (Songsore and Denkabe, 1996:127) for poverty alleviation should be the concern of the DA.

Conclusion

The DAs in Ghana are not supportive of self-reliant, people-centred development which empowers rural people by giving them a stake in the development process. Local ownership of programmes has also not been achieved under the DAs due to lack of involvement of the poor. They are, therefore, likely to remain poor because the current decentralised system does not provide them with power and resources to act and participate in decision-making about issues that affect their lives. There was a unanimous response from the rural poor that the ~ District Assemblies have had no beneficial impact on their livelihood systems.

Given a voice, resources, awareness of government commitment to poverty alleviation, and transparency and responsiveness of DAs to their felt needs, the rural poor could wage a relentless war against poverty under the DAs. The seriousness in their voices testifies to this,

as a middle aged man at Akrokerri summed up: "if they listen to us, provide us with inputs, support our economic activities in the village, and offer help in marketing our products, we could finance and build our own schools, clinics, good drinking water and maintain them better and we could live better lives".

A much stronger commitment from central government to decentralisation -in terms of power-sharing and financial provision -will be required, if Ghana's rural poor are to experience the benefits which devolution, in theory , promises.

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