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Poverty and Wellbeing at the ‘Grassroots’—How Much is Visible to Researchers?

Meera Tiwari

Abstract

This paper discusses the grassroots level understanding of poverty and wellbeing. There is rich debate and ever expanding literature on the meaning of wellbeing and poverty and their relationship in developing countries. In recent times wellbeing and poverty have been scrutinised within the discourse on multidimensionality of poverty. Most research outputs though are grounded in quantitative data. Investigations that focus on the perceptions and understandings of poor people about their situations remain sparse in the literature. The current study is an attempt to address this gap. The paper explores the common grounds and the points of departure between the researchers’ views of poverty and wellbeing and the perception at the grassroots. The paper presents findings of primary research conducted by the author in Dhar district of Madhya Pradesh and Madhubani district of Bihar in India. Semi-structured survey instruments were deployed to interview a selection of poor, marginal and non-poor households. In addition to identifying the commonalities in grassroots and researchers’ understandings of poverty, the paper draws attention to factors that may be outside the radar of the researchers. It is envisaged that mapping a more holistic understanding of poverty and wellbeing will have important longterm policy implications for poverty reduction.

Keywords

Poverty, Wellbeing, Grassroots level

1 Introduction

This paper discusses understandings of poverty and wellbeing at the ‘grassroots’ or local level, as distinct from international development discourse or academic perspectives. Researchers in the field of international development have intensely debated the relationship between wellbeing and poverty, for example, Seers (1969); ILO (1976); Morris (1979); Sen (1982); Streeten (1984) to the more recent debates on the Millennium Development Goals (UNDP 2003, 2005) and the Wellbeing Approach (WeD 2004–2007). There is recognition and growing agreement on the inter-changeability of the goals of increasing wellbeing and reducing multi-dimensional poverty among researchers. The quest for better understanding and measurement of wellbeing in developing countries has never been higher on the international development agenda; however the agenda, debates and research outputs are mainly based on quantitative data. The World Bank’s comprehensive effort to capture the ‘voices of the poor’ has come under criticism for lack of rigour and ‘storytelling’. There is a paucity of studies that focus on the perception and understanding of poor people about their wellbeing. The current study is an attempt to address this gap.

This paper is based on the findings of primary research carried out by the author with 102 rural households in Dhar district of Madhya Pradesh in India. Household heads from three income categories of households—those below the poverty line, marginal and ‘comfortable’; non-poor households were interviewed using semi-structured methods. The fieldwork for this paper is part of the broader research project to study user and non-user perspectives of an Information and Communication Technology enabled rural development project, Gyandoot. The paper identifies commonality in the perceptions of the population at the grassroots level and the theoretical and empirical literature reviewed here in their

understanding of wellbeing. More importantly, it draws attention to factors such as local perceptions of poverty, corruption and over population that are critical in how wellbeing is understood at the grassroots level, but may be outside the radar of researchers. It is envisaged that such a mapping of local understandings of wellbeing has important longterm policy implications for poverty reduction in this area.

The paper is organised in five sections. Following a brief introduction, the Sect. 2 provides an overview of literature on conceptualisations of poverty and wellbeing. A description of the area where the research was carried out, the methodological stance adopted in the study and some demographic features of the sample population is given in Sect. 3. Section 4 examines the findings and explores how these compare with the known correlates of poverty and its causation with reference to comparable studies in the literature. This is followed by a brief discussion of the conditions under which the research took place and how these might have influenced the study outcomes. Conclusions of the study are presented in Sect. 5.

2 Wellbeing in Developing Countries—Current Literature and Researchers' Perceptions

The contemporary understanding of poverty has been much enriched with the debates on the basic needs approach—Seers (1969); ILO (1976); Baster (1979); Hicks and Streeten (1979); culminating in Morris's (1979) physical quality of life index (PQLI). Chambers (1983) work on non-monetary poverty has also been influential, as has Doyle and Gough (1991) expansion of the basic needs approach to include health and autonomy, and the subsequent emergence of the word wellbeing in development discourses. Another strong influence on the conceptualisation of poverty has been Sen's (1982, 1985, 1999) Capability Approach. The multidimensionality of poverty assumed within Sen's Capability Approach is further broadened by Nussbaum (2000) who has generated a 'universal' list of central human capabilities. The overlap between development and wellbeing in development discourses has been increasingly apparent in the research community since the publication of Bauer's Social Indicators (1966) and Seer's 'Meaning of Development' in 1969 to Sen's work on entitlements, capabilities and well-being. Though 'welfare debates' were central to the pioneers of political economy—Smith, Marx, Ricardo and Mill as well as being traced to the Aristotelian thoughts. Sen (1999, p. 74) himself dwelled in depth on the numerous dimensions of wellbeing in his discussions on Freedom and the Foundations of Justice. The UNDP too has played a pivotal role in shaping the current thinking of development through the contributions of Sen and Haq in establishing the yearly Human Development Report since 1990.¹ The Human Development Reports placed human beings and their wellbeing, defined as 'a long and healthy life', 'knowledge and education' and 'a decent standard of living', at the centre of the development process.

More recently research on wellbeing in developing countries has added yet more dimensions to the debate on the understanding of development. For example, the Wellbeing in Developing Countries ESRC Research Group (WeD) traces the roots of wellbeing back to Aristotle—a strong similarity with the Capability Approach since both focus on the centrality of human beings in development. The conceptualisation of wellbeing put forward by WeD (Gough et al. 2006) moves attention beyond the 'deprivation sets' of the poor to what the poor have. McGregor (2007, p. 317) argues that wellbeing 'aris[es] from the combination of what a person has, what they can do with what they have, and how they think about what they have and can do'. It is postulated that wellbeing approaches link current development thinking to wider debates in social sciences and further the understanding of poverty dynamics. The concept comprises the 'objective' circumstances of individuals—Objective Wellbeing—and their 'subjective' understanding of their situation— Subjective Wellbeing. A detailed discussion on the meaning of Objective and Subjective Wellbeing, their relationship with one another, as well as linkages with more orthodox monetary measures is provided in Gasper (2004). While reference is made to Objective Wellbeing as the 'partner' to Subjective

Wellbeing, it is noted that there is not always a strong correlation between the two. Further, although Objective Wellbeing is associated with ‘non-feeling’ attributes—Sen’s functionings—and Subjective Wellbeing with ‘feeling’ attributes—satisfaction and or felt need fulfilment, the boundary is sometimes blurred. In a subsequent elaboration, Gasper (2007) defined Objective Wellbeing as ‘externally approved, and thereby normatively endorsed, non-feeling features of a person’s life’ and Subjective Wellbeing as ‘feelings of the person whose wellbeing is being estimated’. The two states of wellbeing may or may not have the same determinants, and one may not even necessarily promote the other.

A more fundamental question on wellbeing in developing countries is explored by Gough et al. (2006). The authors discuss the apparent ‘incongruity’ in exploring the wellbeing of people experiencing economic and social deprivation. A strong rationale is provided for the study of wellbeing in poor communities by drawing attention to—first the universal human need to strive to better themselves and the next generation, and second to the inadequacy of defining people as poor by material poverty alone, a point that has also been made in debates over the multidimensionality of poverty. It would appear that the original contribution of the wellbeing approach is the study of Subjective Wellbeing, as Gasper’s (2007) definition of Objective Wellbeing largely captures deprivation, which has also been measured by researchers such as Gordon et al. (2004). Gough et al. (2006) acknowledge the shifts in the understanding of poverty and money metric measures to human development and non-monetary measures of poverty in the later sections of the paper (see also Sumner 2007).¹

Camfield (2006), further expanding on Subjective Wellbeing argues that it should not be merely equated with happiness, but connected with aspects that people value in their lives. By focusing on what poor people have, are able to do, and want to do in their lives, the approach presents a more comprehensive understanding of the lives of the poor. It is observed that until recently debates over Subjective Wellbeing were confined to developed countries. Within developing countries holistic understandings of poverty have been sought using participatory methods (White and Petit 2004) and the paper provides an overview of this literature.

The findings of some participatory research in the 1990s suggest a multidimensional understanding of wellbeing with emphasis on the fulfilment of ‘basic needs’. Moore et al.’s (1998) research on the understanding of local perceptions of poverty and ill being in Asia is of particular relevance to this study. His enquiry explores poverty through a set of direct questions, leading to a number of indicators of poverty identified by the poor themselves. The investigative framework focuses on (i) local definitions of ‘poverty’, (ii) the causes of poverty and how these might be explained, (iii) factors maintaining and furthering poverty, (iv) opportunities for escaping poverty, and (v) how poverty can be reduced. Other questions centred on aspects of ‘wellbeing’, for example, security, vulnerability and impacts on livelihoods. The current study is also concerned with understandings of poverty and its causes in the selected rural population. Section 4 discusses the similarities and the differences in the findings of the current study with those of Moore et al. (1998).

The key determinants of wellbeing in Moore et al. (1998) are found to be (i) ownership of assets (land and other possessions), (ii) food and income security, (iii) education, and (iv) predominance of males in the household. Ownership of assets and income security also

¹ The Human Development Report uses three basic dimensions of human development—a long and healthy life, knowledge and a decent standard of living captured through life expectancy at birth, adult literacy rate (with two-third weight) and the combined primary, secondary and tertiary gross enrolment ratio (with one third weight) and GDP per capita to calculate the Human Development Index (HDI).

feature in Mukherjee's (1997) findings in rural Uttar Pradesh (India), in addition to access to public services and community harmony. The two sets of deprivation indicators identified by Moore et al. (1998) further reinforce the multidimensional nature of poor people's wellbeing. The first set is situated in material poverty, while the causes for the second set are unsatisfactory social situations of discrimination, especially due to gender, and their effect on self-respect. The study indicates the higher priority given to the satisfaction of basic needs than to the fulfilment of the objectives of independence and autonomy (see also Devine et al. 2007). It also notes the near absence of women in national development plans. A similar study in Bangladesh by Mahbub and Roy (1997) also showed the importance of basic needs, though it explicitly added health concerns, which were less obvious in the previous studies.

The World Bank's 'Voices of the Poor' series² has attracted much popular and academic attention since its publication (1999–2002) as drawing general conclusions from individual case studies based in extremely diverse contexts is undeniably challenging. Thematic strands that emerged from the series largely supported the findings of earlier studies, particularly in relation to ownership of assets, capabilities and social situations. The project can be praised for its extensive deployment of the participatory approach in a comprehensive study of poor communities in numerous countries. The case studies also present rich data on individual lives that is often masked in quantitative methods. However the 'storytelling' can be questioned for its methodological robustness and the speed with which it moves to policy implications. Other studies, for example, Brock (1999); Clark (2000), reinforce the multidimensional nature of wellbeing, but also emphasise the influence of context, values and culture in defining wellbeing terminology—one size doesn't necessarily fit all.

In summary then what are the key messages from recent research on wellbeing? Wellbeing is typically conceptualised as Objective and Subjective (e.g. Gasper 2004). The former focuses on the 'non-feeling' situational attributes and the latter on the 'feeling' attributes—satisfaction and/or felt need fulfilment. While one does not necessarily promote the other, understandings and causal relationships within both categories are shown to be multidimensional in nature. Both material and social contexts are important determinants of Objective and Subjective Wellbeing. Wellbeing research approaches look beyond the material deprivation of poor people and are grounded in what poor people have, are able to do with what they have, and feel about what they have and can do. One of the key features that emerged from the different participatory studies was the role of context, values and culture in shaping the precise understanding of wellbeing. This paper investigates the understanding of wellbeing at the grassroots level in rural Madhya Pradesh in India and examines how it relates to the academic understandings of wellbeing described above. The overall focus is on the understanding of structural aspects and causation expressed by rural people.

3 Wellbeing in Developing Countries—A Grassroots Level Perception: Case Study of Dhar District in Madhya Pradesh, India

The study sample is drawn from rural areas of Dhar district in Madhya Pradesh. The research focused on local understandings of wellbeing and the extent to which they reflect multidimensional conceptions of poverty and wellbeing. The study is grounded in primary research entailing both structured and semi-structured interviews with 102 respondents each representing a different household. A brief description of Dhar district is given below, highlighting some of its special socio-economic characteristics. This is followed by a discussion and analysis of the findings of the primary research.

² The Consultations with the Poor study is published in three volumes—Volume 1: "Can anyone hear us?" (Narayan et al. 1999) synthesised 81 participatory poverty assessments conducted in 50 countries, Volume 2: "Crying out for Change" (Narayan et al. 2000), Volume 3: From Many Lands, Narayan and Petesch 2002).

Dhar is one of the 52 administrative divisions of the state of Madhya Pradesh in India. The state is among the four Indian states³ with the lowest human development indicators amongst the fifteen main Indian states. Unlike most northern states, the population density of Madhya Pradesh is low at 183 persons per square kilometre as compared with the national average of 324 persons per square kilometre (GoI 2001a). Since the mid 1990s there has been remarkable economic growth and progress in literacy and poverty reduction, even in comparison to the national figures for the same period. Amongst the four BIMARU states, it has the highest literacy rate of 64.1% (the national average is 65%), while Rajasthan has 61%, Uttar Pradesh 57.4% and Bihar 47.5% (GoI 2001b). Further, Madhya Pradesh was one of the seven states in the country that experienced growth rates of over 5%⁴ during the 1990s. In addition, the state expenditure in social sectors has much improved, accounting for almost 40% of the total state expenditure in 2000. Nonetheless the health indicators (infant and child mortality rates; life expectancy) continue to be one of the worst in the country and remain a cause for concern. There is increasing awareness of the challenges facing the government in the delivery of an effective health service. In recent years there has been a concerted effort to expand the provision of public health services and improve their access in rural and urban areas. A unique feature worth mentioning is the strong presence of the private sector in providing outpatient health services such as clinics and pharmacies.

Dhar is a primarily agricultural district with 62% of its land under cultivation and over 83% of its population working in the rural sector. It has a rich history which makes tourism a strong industry. The district accounts for 3% of the state population of 60.3 million. The literacy rate at 52.7%—48% rural and 75% urban—is well below the state average of 64.1%. In January 2000, a government owned computer network (Gyandoot) was launched in Madhya Pradesh. The objective was to improve the accessibility and use of government services by the rural poor. Gyandoot was a pioneering experiment taking Information and Communications Technology (ICTs) into rural India. The government-sponsored initiative was set up to use e-governance, e-commerce and e-education to support development programmes, for example, by providing health information and online land registration. An intranet kiosk network is the main delivery mechanism for the various services provided to meet the Gyandoot objectives. The information kiosks (Soochanalaya) were initially set up in 21 village centres of the district. Each information kiosk covers 20–30 villages and a total population of between 20,000 and 30,000 persons. The kiosks are run by an operator—the ‘Soochak’, who is usually a local graduate (minimum education qualification is 10th standard) selected by the Gyandoot committee.

The fieldwork for this study therefore took place within a context of progress, and was framed within an evaluation of Gyandoot, an innovative development programme. One hundred and two persons comprising users and non-users of the Gyandoot services from three economic groupings were interviewed. Effort was made to select individuals from households from three economic categories—those below the poverty line, marginal and ‘comfortable’—non-poor households. Two types of primary data were collected: firstly, survey data on household members’ literacy levels, livelihoods, ownership of economic assets and other demographic characteristics. Secondly, information from semi-structured open-ended interviews focusing on the respondent’s views of the usefulness of Gyandoot services and their understanding of poverty and its causes. This paper uses this qualitative data to explore respondents’ understandings of poverty and its causes—the focus here being on ‘Objective Wellbeing’ as

³ The four Indian states classified as having the lowest Development Indicators of income poverty, infant mortality and literacy are: Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh, labelled the BIMARU states—also a Hindi word meaning ‘ill’ or ‘unwell’.

⁴ The states with the highest growth rates during the 1990s were Gujarat 9.6%, Maharashtra 8.0%, West Bengal 6.9%, Tamil Nadu 6.2%, Rajasthan 5.9% and Kerala 5.8%.

outlined in Sect. 2. The interviews were conducted by trained researchers who spoke the same language as the interviewees. In addition, the interaction took place in the interviewees' living environment, often surrounded by the respondent's neighbours, family members and acquaintances.

The ratio of users and non-users of Gyandoot services in the surveyed sample was around 2:3 (44 users and 58 non-users). The profiles of the two groups show the user group to have a higher proportion of those above the poverty line⁵ (80%) as compared with the non-user group (66%). The educational levels for the user group show only 16% of users to be illiterate as compared with 26% of non-users. Almost half of the users (49%) are large farmers, while the landless and medium farmers make up almost two thirds of the nonusers.

Overall, the surveyed sample indicates that those with higher levels of literacy and income are accessing the Gyandoot services more frequently than those with lower literacy and incomes. The relationships between the indicators—literacy/educational level, income, and occupation were inconclusive.⁶

4 The Common Grounds and Points of Departure

The fieldwork comprised two components, as noted in the previous section: the perspectives of users and non-users on the Gyandoot ICT network, and the understanding of poverty and its causes in the same cohort of subjects. The second component is the central theme of this paper and resonates with aspects of Moore et al.'s (1998) work that explores local perceptions of poverty and wellbeing in Asia. The present study, albeit using a small rural sample, highlights commonalities as well as features that have not been found in previous studies and appear to be unique to this project.

The respondents were asked the two questions on poverty through a direct translation of the word 'poverty' into Hindi: 'gareebi'. These followed the structured questions on household demographics and semi-structured questions on respondents' perspectives on Gyandoot services. The poverty questions were:

- What is their understanding of poverty?
- What in their view are the causes of poverty?

The overall response for the first question—'what is their understanding of poverty?' can be broadly placed into the five categories shown in Table 1.

The majority of the responses highlighted low ownership of land, poor resources, and insufficient work and income opportunities as 'being in poverty'. Poverty was also characterised as being illiterate and not being able to satisfy basic needs such as not having sufficient food, clothing and housing. The respondents appear to be focusing on what they don't have—i.e. deprivation—and therefore exhibit what wellbeing researchers have termed a 'deficit approach' to the understanding of poverty (Camfield and McGregor 2005).⁷

⁵ Here BPL indicates those below poverty line and APL represents those above poverty line. The poverty line here is the national poverty line of Rs 365 per month (Rs 12 per day) and not the World Bank's dollar a day poverty measure. Those below poverty line are given a red book by the state government.

⁶ For a detailed discussion, see ICTs and Poverty Reduction: User perspective study of rural Madhya Pradesh, India (Tiwari 2008a, b; DSA conference paper and forthcoming in the European Journal for Development Research in 2008).

⁷ The author is grateful to Gina Crivello for drawing attention to this point.

While lack of education, skills and opportunities to realise one’s potential are recognised as components of poverty, the main emphasis remains on economic measures. Low ownership of land and lack of income opportunities are equated with being in poverty, highlighting the importance of material poverty in people’s definitions. Within a Wellbeing framework this would indicate the emphasis on Objective Wellbeing in describing poverty.

Table 1. What is poverty?

Source: Based on author’s fieldwork

Poverty is	Responses (%)
Landlessness	40
Having no work	22
Basic needs not being met	10
Illiteracy	4
No reply	15
Others	9

Clearly the understanding of poverty at the grassroots level in the selected agrarian area is driven primarily by the need for economic security. Land continues to be the most secure form of livelihood in rural agricultural societies. Absence of or poor access to other income sources that would provide livelihood security for the landless is also part of being in poverty. Inability to fulfil basic needs further reinforces the life security priorities. Dimensions of social poverty such as discrimination, social exclusion, and people’s perceptions of these, which have been highlighted by participatory researchers, appear to be peripheral to respondents’ understanding of poverty and being in poverty.

A close examination of the 15% of responses in the categories of ‘no reply’ and 9% in ‘others’ reveal further characteristics of respondents and components of poverty. In the ‘no reply’ category, 87% of the respondents belonged to the above poverty line (APL) group, which may suggest that they felt the question was irrelevant or didn’t feel obliged to answer. 60% were users of the Gyandoot services and all belonged to either the medium farmer or the large farmer category. The educational level of this group ranged from illiterate to middle school. The profile of the ‘no reply’ respondents therefore indicates that they do not belong to the poor class, which suggests that the study was capturing the views of poorer respondents.

Interestingly, the relationship between literacy/educational level, income and occupation appears to be inconclusive—a number of those above the poverty line and in the large farmer category were also in the illiterate category or with very little formal education. At the same time, a number of interviewees who had up to secondary level education were landless and working as casual labourers. This could be a partial explanation of why the majority of respondents did not equate illiteracy with being poor.

The ‘other’ category includes aspects of disability, which is an important dimension of poverty and has been addressed in recent debates on disability and wellbeing and explored within the Capability Approach (Crabtree 2007; Kittay and Feder 2003). A more detailed analysis of disability and poverty is beyond the scope of the present study due to the small sample. However, the findings illustrate the awareness of the links between disability and poverty at the grassroots level and offer rich potential to further explore the issue within agrarian communities. This is reflected in the following response ‘those who are handicapped are poor as they cannot do anything for themselves and have to depend on others. There is no help and they become a burden’.

The indicators of poverty that emerge, namely landlessness, income insecurity and inability to meet basic needs such as food, housing and clothing, are also noted in Moore et al. (1998), although Beck's (1994) claim that the poor put a higher value on self-respect than food and other bodily needs does not appear to hold in the surveyed sample. A direct question forcing the respondent to make a choice between 'food' and 'self-respect' was not asked; instead the respondents who were either users or non-users of Gyandoot were asked about their understanding of poverty. Consistently the respondents demonstrated a greater concern with livelihood security and basic needs. Nonetheless, the understanding of poverty at the grassroots level cannot be reduced to lack of income, as other dimensions of poverty are reflected in the high value given to long-term life security and stability through landownership. Figure 1 shows local understandings of poverty—based on findings of the primary research (Table 1).

It is possible that the somewhat narrow meaning of poverty that emerges from the findings is a result of the translation of the word 'poverty' and may also reflect the interviewers' own understanding. A more important question is whether the respondents perceived poverty as encompassing deprivation, social poverty and ill-being, as is increasingly the argument made by researchers in the international development community. For example, by moving from questions on material deprivation to encompass non-economic dimensions such as social relationships, Moore et al. (1998) were able to demonstrate a robust multidimensionality in the understanding of poverty.

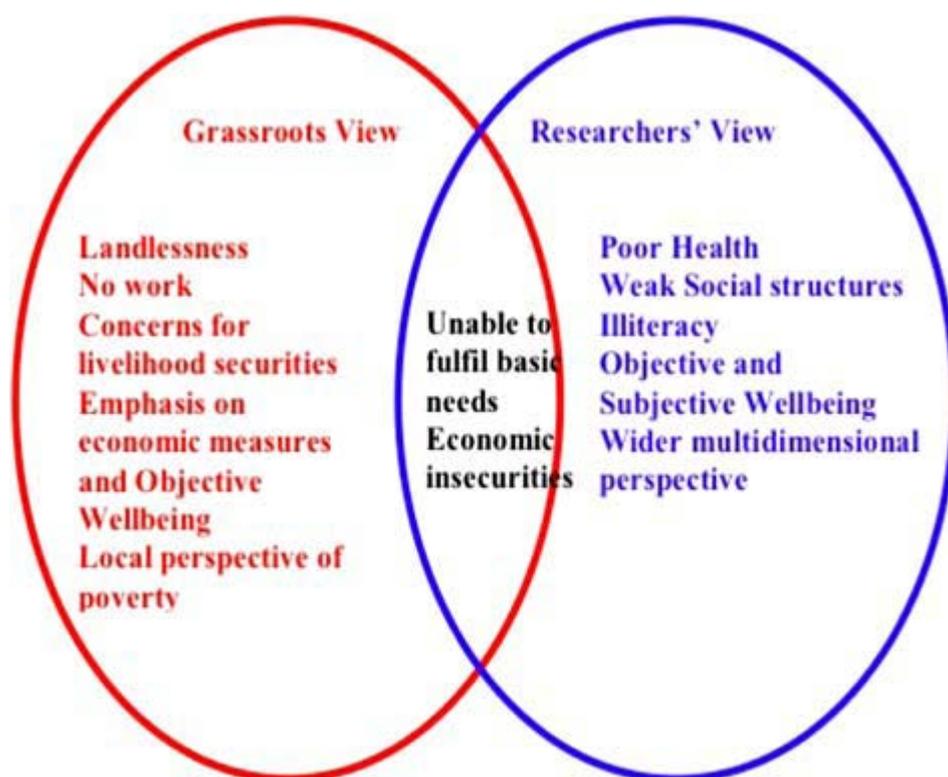


Fig. 1 What is poverty: grassroots understandings and researchers' views

In an earlier study based in Asia and Africa, Chambers (1995) derived a detailed set of criteria for ill-being that resonates with researchers' perceptions of the multidimensionality of poverty. Chambers ill-being indicators include lack of assets, disability, social exclusion (for example, being a widow or single parent, low status work, lacking social support) and insufficient income to educate children and fulfil basic needs. In addition the respondents appear to have a view of poverty arising from within their local context. This is again an observation made in Moore et al. (1998). The rural respondents tend to compare their

situations with better-off people locally. Their views of poverty do not appear to include either what poverty may mean within peri-urban and urban contexts, or any generic definition of poverty.

It can be inferred then that the literal translation of poverty results in answers that relate to economic and livelihood security, which may also have been framed by the preceding questions. While other dimensions are present and very important, for these to be discussed under the umbrella of poverty, the questions needed to be elaborated and explained to the respondents. For example ‘explain what you understand as being poor’, ‘tell us about the experiences of the poor’, ‘are these problems experienced only by the poor’, etc.

The response to the question—‘what in your view are the causes of poverty?’ illustrates a far deeper engagement with the different dimensions of poverty as shown in Table 2. The four main causative factors (lack of education, poverty, over population, and corruption) comprised 80% of the responses, and the remaining 20% was made up of three smaller factors. Lack of education is seen as the main cause of poverty in the surveyed sample. This is indicative of the respondents’ wider vision of what causes poverty which extends beyond the local context where education may seem to be of little practical use. Information regarding life securities and rewards associated with education beyond the rural world is disseminated even in remote villages via radio, mobiles and the rapidly expanding satellite television networks. These are mostly owned by the richer ‘comfortable’ households, but communal television and radio time are common in villages. Nonetheless, illiteracy was equated with poverty by a very small proportion of the respondents, especially in comparison to landlessness as noted earlier. Lack of education is therefore unlikely to be the main cause of local poverty.

Table 2. What are the causes of poverty

Source: Based on author’s fieldwork

Causes of poverty	Response (%)
Corruption in Government	21
Over population	13
Unemployment	23
Lack of education	24
No reply	6
Poor crop prices	4
Others	9

The second main cause of poverty was unemployment. This is a generic livelihood concern that applies in both the local and the wider contexts. The remaining two factors demonstrate the respondents’ awareness of the factors beyond income and livelihood securities that cause poverty. Concerns over the negative impact of over-population on limited natural resources and its assumed relationship with poverty rekindle Malthusian debates about the effects of the different growth patterns for resources and population. In recent times though, the concerns are more about how to make the young population of the country an asset in the globally shrinking skilled labour market.

Corruption, including inefficiencies of the government in reaching the poor, was reported by over a fifth of the respondents as causing poverty. A further examination of this group shows poorer respondents to be attributing poverty to Government failure in helping the poor and the inaccessibility of the development programmes for the poor. Most respondents who were in the APL (above poverty line) category indicated corruption at the Government level as

causing poverty. Both wealthier and poorer respondents appeared well informed about the political environment in the state and did not hesitate in adopting a critical stance towards the government. This is an important and unique aspect of political freedom reinforcing the democratic framework in the country. It offers empirical support to debates on democracy and development within the Capability Approach (Sen 1999).

Over population and corruption are two of the four main causes of poverty that emerge from the survey findings. These do not appear as causes either in Moore et al.'s (1998) work or in subsequent research on wellbeing. Since the former study was carried out in 1998, this may be attributable to the increasing awareness and information of the common citizen regarding the functioning of the Government in rural areas. The finding on corruption and government failure reinforce the 'traps' identified by Collier (2007). In his book, *The Bottom Billion*, Collier identifies poor governance and corruption issues, resource mismanagement, and political instability as the root causes of poverty. In recent debates, failures in governance and their impact on development have drawn increasing attention, and good governance is often a condition for grants and loans (World Bank 2007; Kaufmann and Kraay 2007).

What are the common grounds then—the commonalities and points of departure between what the researchers know about poverty and its causes, and what is perceived at the grass roots level? As shown in Fig. 2, the common ground mostly relates to the meaning of poverty where economic indicators predominate. It is the causation of poverty that brings out the points of departure. While indicators of poverty at the grassroots level are multidimensional, these are not discussed under a single overarching concept. The multidimensionality is better demonstrated when the poverty questions are explained and elaborated. In contrast, researchers' understandings of the terms 'poverty' and 'wellbeing' have become far more complex. Second, the focus of poverty remains on economic issues and concerns with livelihood security. Aspects of social poverty do not emerge in a significant way through questions using a literal translation of the word poverty. Third, awareness of government programmes for development, governance issues and corruption feature prominently as causes of poverty at the grassroots level. These do not appear as major factors in the theoretical literature and other research undertaken in similar communities.

Some limitations need to be mentioned before discussing the conclusions and implications of the above findings. Both the subject of the research and the mixed methodology used are complex, as also acknowledged in Moore et al. (1998). Despite concerted efforts to capture the views of the most disadvantaged, the poorest households are often not represented. The interaction mostly takes place with the interviewer and the interviewee being surrounded by family, neighbours and friends. It is difficult to isolate the interviewee and the interviewer; in fact attempts to do this can increase suspicion and worsen the quality of information. The information collected is therefore bound to be influenced by the presence of other people, for example, the respondent may not wish to admit certain facts in front of others.

It is understandable and natural for people to be cautious in what they say and reveal only partial information to outsiders who may have at most spent a few hours to a few days building 'trust'. The poorer cohorts appeared to be more willing and open to sharing information—often in the hope that this encounter may lead to improvement in their situation. The expectation, as some of the respondents explained, is that the researchers would communicate their views to officials and persuade them to increase either the number of development schemes or respondents' access to the existing ones. Wealthier respondents on the other hand adopted a more measured stance towards sharing of information. Overall it is difficult to gauge which of the respondents were revealing partial information and to what extent this affected the findings.

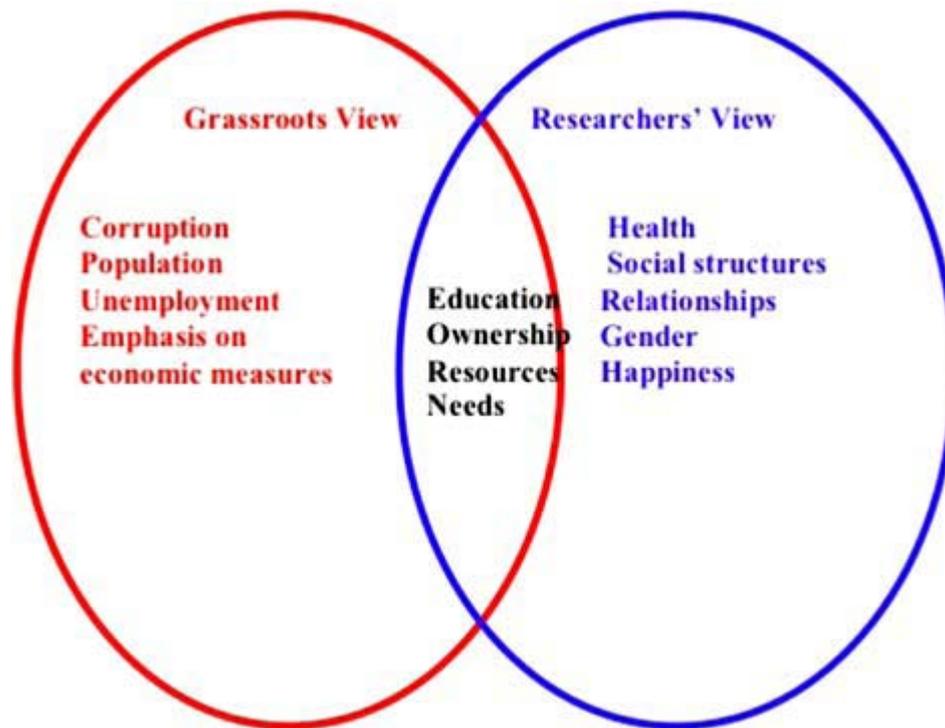


Fig. 2 Causes of poverty: commonalities and differences in the grassroots and the researchers' perception

An important issue that is conspicuous through its absence in the findings is anything relating to gender. As noted in Sect. 3 of this paper, the selected sample was interviewed to assess the user and the non-user perspective on the Gyandoot services. While two of the fifteen operators were women, none were users, so women were not included in the sample. This may partially explain the absence of gender concerns. The survey did indicate that almost all female adults from user and non-user households were illiterate, or at best educated up to class 3. In order to gain an in-depth understanding of the gender concerns of poverty in the area, women need to be represented better in the sample.

5 Conclusions

The conclusions reiterate the key findings of the fieldwork conducted in Dhar district in Madhya Pradesh during 2007. While the study covered many topics (see Tiwari 2008a, b), the main concern of this paper is the understanding of poverty and its causes at the grassroots level. The purpose is twofold: firstly to examine the common ground—what is visible to both local people and researchers regarding the understanding and causes of poverty. Secondly, to highlight the points of departure—what is not visible to the researcher regarding poverty and its causes, but is perceived at the grass roots level. The common understanding of poverty mostly concerns the economic meaning of poverty. The points of departure are highlighted through the understanding of the causation of poverty. Firstly, multidimensionality is better reflected when the poverty questions are explained and elaborated. The causes of poverty at the grassroots level are multidimensional, but not discussed in response to a direct question about 'poverty'. In contrast, the researchers' understanding of the single terms 'poverty' and 'wellbeing' has become far more complex. Secondly, the focus of poverty at the grassroots level remains on economic issues and concerns with livelihood security. Social poverty does not emerge in a significant way through a literal translation of the word poverty, although it is undeniably important. Thirdly, the insensitivity of government development programmes to the needs of poorer populations, governance issues and corruption feature prominently as causes of poverty at the grassroots level. These do not appear as major factors in comparable

research. The demonstration of in-depth cognisance with the role of government and governance issues in poverty reduction at the grassroots level reflects a well-informed population, albeit one with low literacy levels. The participation of such populations in development projects can be an asset in terms of implementation, accountability and local needs assessment.

The findings also indicate that while local understandings of poverty appear to have a local frame of reference, perspectives on the causes of poverty are set within wider contexts. Rural respondents tend to judge their situations with better-off people within a visible local context. However, their views on what causes poverty appear to be informed by the broader debates at the regional and national levels. Awareness of political and national issues observed amongst the respondents can be attributed to this wider perspectives on the correlates of poverty. This distinction can have important policy implications for the short and long term objectives of development projects.

Overall, the contextual nature of the meaning and causes of poverty are reinforced by the findings of this study. The subject is difficult and complex to capture, irrespective of the methodology. The use of qualitative methods enables direct engagement with the central object of development—the ‘human beings’. However, people’s openness and willingness to share information and knowledge with the researcher is difficult to predict. Further, a special approach is needed to capture the views of poorest cohorts who are often not represented in primary research conducted by external agencies—as also noted in other studies. In conclusion, researchers’ understanding of challenges to improving policy and programming can be enhanced by exploring local perspectives on the meaning and causes of poverty and wellbeing.

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