

# Market research with the poor

Asking the rural poor about their information needs



**In Bangladesh the rural poor face many difficulties, including accessing good quality, reliable information that can help them in their various livelihood activities. Current methods of communication are ill-suited to the integrated ways in which poor people make their decisions. So how can information systems be improved so that poor rural men and women can pursue opportunities that they perceive as potentially beneficial to their livelihoods? A logical starting point, and one that is not usually considered, is simply to ask the poor what they want – a market research approach.**

## In Bangladesh

Over the past decade, agricultural research has played a significant role in achieving self-sufficiency in staple foods in Bangladesh. Implicit in this is the assumption that increased crop productivity will automatically lead to improved economic well-being among poor farmers and landless workers. However, the equation is not that simple. Poor people perceive a more complex picture. In addition to concerns about the performance of their crops, they also experience such things as marketing problems; low and seemingly unfair farm-gate prices, and high input costs; and a lack of organic manures resulting from pressures on feed supplies and animal ownership.

## Poor access to quality information

Many of the difficulties that resource-poor people face are exacerbated by poor access to good quality information relevant to their various farming and livelihood endeavours. To try and fill this gap a research project investigated how access to agriculture-related information, that better suited their needs, might enable

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poor people to derive much greater benefits from rural services, from both government and non-government providers. The project did not take the more conventional approach of asking those who supply information. Rather it focused entirely on the views of the rural poor. It was analogous to market research asking such questions as: What kind of information do you want? Where do you go to get it? In what form do you receive it? What is your view of the quality of all this? Do the various services available meet your needs? What are your preferences and why? Based on the findings from these questions a proto-type for improved information services was designed and tested.

## Market research

The project team, comprising UK and Bangladeshi specialists, and two local development NGOs, conducted a survey in two regions of Bangladesh to determine poor people's information needs. The team used well established participatory rural appraisal techniques combined with a rigorous sampling procedure to ensure that the survey's findings were statistically supportable. They were pro-active in making sure they sampled poor people's views and did not allow less poor people to speak for them. A total of 67 rural groups comprising 950 individuals interacted with researchers, including 30 women-only groups.

The survey findings enabled the team to build a picture of how poor people accessed, evaluated and used information. Although the survey was primarily concerned with agriculture, comments from those surveyed showed that poor people inter-relate their information needs for crops and livestock production with other aspects of their livelihoods. This included information on markets, credit, and in a wider livelihood context, health matters such as access to vaccination services for children.

The survey found that poor rural people were well aware of the difficulties they face in accessing good quality and reliable information. They were also able to articulate their information needs as well as evaluate information sources and information providers. Common criticisms were that information is not always clear, was often incomplete or not useful, and channels of information were not always accessible.



People used a wide range of information sources but they were heavily dependent on 'close' sources such as neighbours and development workers visiting their village. They valued face-to-face contact as a means of getting information. In one village, where farmers grew watermelons, they were heavily dependent on truck drivers and hoteliers for information on markets and prices. They would have liked a more independent and reliable source.

People found information from the mass media (radio, television) hard to interpret and incomplete, and were doubtful about its reliability. Broadcasts were misunderstood because they were not in the local dialect. One farmer cultivated papaya after listening to a radio programme but was unsuccessful because the information was incomplete and the seed he obtained was of poor quality.

Equally important was that many poor people could not afford the time to seek out information or afford the costs involved such as transport and payments to officials. They were also wary of being rejected or ignored if they went to government offices asking for information about the services available.

### Developing a proto-type

The Bangladeshi partners took these findings very much on board. They realised their mission to help the poor did not mean that they should try to second guess what they wanted. Instead of approaching people with their established programmes, such as homestead gardening or small livestock keeping, they needed to help people to identify and prioritise their own information needs. Based on the survey findings and the strong 'buy-in' by the

Bangladeshi partners, the team worked closely together to design a proto-type for improved information services which they tested with a sample of farmer groups. This included helping the groups to make contact with providers who could meet their information and service needs in areas that the NGOs themselves could not cover.

At one farmers' meeting participants presented their needs to representatives from eight government departments and one seed company who explained the services available. Representatives from both sides were nominated to establish contact and facilitate people's needs. Subsequently farmer representatives visited their sub-district centre to make specific requests to officials with whom they had not had good contact in the past. One participant commented: *'Earlier we felt shy and afraid to visit any office for fear of being neglected or having to pay for services. Now we are confident enough to visit any offices and contact officials to collect information or get services without any additional expenditure... service providers now give us due importance and provide all necessary support'*.

The beneficial impact of this work on strengthening people's ability to identify available services and approach providers was visible within a few months. Equally rapid was the impact on the staff of partner organisations who became more knowledgeable about services from other providers thus making them more effective resource people for rural services. Although the impact on livelihoods will take longer to assess, some people who received skills training are already translating this into income-generating activities or new farm enterprises.



### A win-win situation

The success of the field study and the proto-type design, its testing, and outcome is a good example of a win-win situation for all the parties concerned.

The *farmers* received a better service. A video made during the proto-type testing not only illustrates the types of improved information services provided but also provides a record of farmers' views on what they gained from them. It shows how quality information helped farmers to build their capabilities and confidence through such things as access to training, obtaining better quality farming inputs, and contact with advisors for specific types of information.

The *local NGOs* gained experience of a better way of working for the poor and achieved a more pro-poor

impact. The outcome of the research was so favourable they also had the satisfaction of experiencing the rewards for their time and commitment to the field studies and their leading role in the design and testing of the proto-type.

The *local consultants* gained experience of field survey methods and rigorous data analysis. They had the satisfaction of seeing a worthwhile outcome and now have a comparative advantage for undertaking pro-poor market research.

The *UK researchers* also gained experience in the design and analysis of studies that use participatory methods, inter-disciplinary and inter-organisational partnerships, and the integration of uptake promotion into research.

## Promoting method and findings

The project developed guidelines for undertaking pro-poor market research in Bangla for local use by development agencies. A video was also produced that covers the project's survey method and experiences of pro-poor service provision and complements the information in the guidelines. Both products stress the importance of working closely with poor people to identify their information needs and to encourage them to use different information and service providers instead of relying only on the agency with which they primarily relate.

## The future

This project is an example of developing robust evidence for the need to change service provision that targets the rural poor. Not only did the NGO partners recognise the value of the survey's findings, and took action on them, they also appreciated the importance of undertaking pro-poor market research rather than second guessing the needs of the poor. One NGO is already making plans to ensure that market research with the poor becomes a key preliminary phase of their future community-based work.

The experience has generated considerable interest in the two project regions among government and, more particularly, non-government development agencies that promises well for scaling-up. The NGOs in the project are well regarded in Bangladesh and this bodes well for the continued promotion of pro-poor services and the communication of these experiences to other field workers and to senior policy-makers. One NGO has strong links with the Bangladesh Agricultural University at a level that can influence graduate and post-graduate curricula. This may well create opportunities for spill over into training those who will be involved in rural service provision in the future.

It is well known that there are several facets to livelihoods and the poor are no different. These facets can be best served by better coordination of information services so that accessing information is not a major hurdle and a burden on time for the poor. While such a research finding may not be rocket science, it has shown that it is feasible to provide rural services that can better assist poor men and women to build their livelihoods.



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