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POVERTY IN THREE VILLAGES IN PAPUA

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Spener Rumbewas

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ABSTRACT

The principal objective of this thesis is to explore the issue of poverty in selected research sites in Papua. This objective is broken down to four questions: how is poverty understood, how is it measured, what are its causes and how is it alleviated?

Two approaches were utilised to investigate the above questions. Macro level investigation was based on exploring data available in the official publications while the micro approach was based on fieldwork carried out in the selected sites. The results of the first approach are examined in chapters two, three and four, and the second approach are discussed in chapter five, six, seven and eight.

In relation to the first question, the macro exploration found that poverty is understood mainly in terms of a lack of basic components of life such as income, consumption or basic needs. Understanding poverty from this approach normally uses the poverty line, which is set up based on these items, to separate the poor from the non-poor. According to this line, poverty refers to those people whose consumption falls below the line while the rest are non-poor. This view looks at poverty from one dimension that is an economic dimension. Hence, it does not provide a complete picture of human poverty, which covers not only the economic dimension but also others such as vulnerability, powerlessness, isolation, and a lack of choice.

The micro investigation adopts a poverty understanding stemming from the experience of the poor. This investigation found that the poor understand poverty from what they feel to be lacking in their environment. In this approach, poverty is a lack of assets, in particular natural, physical, human, social and financial assets. Nonetheless, those affected by poverty argue that their poverty is not related to nature, but to physical, human, social and financial assets. This view seems to offer a broader picture of human poverty and hence, it is useful for formulation of or as a basis for a poverty reduction policy.

With regard to the second question, the macro approach found that poverty measurement employs a quantitative measurement of both items and methods. The quantitative items can include income, consumption or basic needs (food and non-food), which are valued in monetary terms. The quantitative methods apply statistical techniques such as headcount index, poverty gap index, poverty severity index and others to measure poverty. This measurement only considers the quantitative aspect and, therefore, it does not pay attention to the qualitative aspect of human poverty.

The micro approach on the other hand, attempts to amalgamate both aspects into a poverty measurement. One of the approaches that attempts an amalgamation of the two is the participatory approach, which is utilised in this study. Although it is a qualitative-based approach, it still opens the window to the use of quantitative approaches. The micro approach seems to offer some benefits such as giving more depth of information regarding human poverty, directly touching the lives of the poor, and facilitating a bottom-up policy to alleviate poverty in the local context.

In the third question, the macro exploration demonstrates that structural forces such as agents, class and institutions bring about poverty through their policies, programmes and rules. The micro investigation on the other hand, shows that individual characteristics and a lack of assets contribute to poverty. This investigation sees that poverty at the micro level is a result of the mutual operation of structural forces, individual characteristics and a lack of assets.

With regard to the last question, both approaches demonstrate a variety of policies to eliminate poverty as discussed in chapters three, six, seven, eight and ten. One framework for a poverty reduction strategy is the Asian Development Bank (ADB) three pillars strategy: social development, pro-poor growth and good governance. However the emphasis is for government commitment and the political will to alleviate poverty. Some experts underline this as a prerequisite to implement a poverty reduction policy because, as they argue, without this the policy will either not exist or will develop only very slowly.

The selected sites experienced poor environments in terms of infrastructure, poor education and skills, poor health and nutrition. This is indeed a manifestation of poor government policies as identified by the poor. From the poor's point of view, it was found that all participants in the fieldwork identified poor policy as a contributing factor of poverty they experienced. This was also justified by looking at the ranking of institutions they gave. In these rankings, government institutions were generally given a rank of less importance by the poor. Participants stated that these institutions were not trusted and were not effective in providing support to the poor.

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