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Future directions for evidence-based decision making in the Pacific

POVERTY AND THE MILLENNIUM DEVELOPMENT GOALS
(Document prepared by the Secretariat of the Pacific Community)

PURPOSE

1. This paper examines progress made to support policies for poverty alleviation and achieving the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) in PICTs. It will highlight SPC and UNDP activities in PICTs related to poverty analysis and support for achieving the MDGs and integrating the MDGs into national sustainable development strategies. Poverty reduction in terms of raising incomes, improving access to basic services and creating economic opportunity are at the core of the MDGs, providing an adequate evidence-based policy environment is critical if these goals are to be achieved.

BACKGROUND

2. Many PICTs and partner stakeholders have a strong commitment to addressing poverty and hardship alleviation within PICTs as a means to achieving broader economic and social development goals, in accordance with their commitments to poverty reduction as signatories of regional and international agreements. Many PICTs in the region have recognised the need for statistical information to determine the level and extent of poverty or hardship and develop policies to address these issues. In response to this need the Asian Development Bank (ADB) established a Regional Poverty Programme (RPP) which, since 2004, has been jointly executed with the SPC Statistics and Demography Programme as RETA 6157 “Strengthening Poverty Analysis and Strategies in the Pacific”. The short- to medium-term objective of the RPP has been “to enhance the capacity and demand, within Government and civil society, for the collection, analysis and effective use of consistent and high quality data related to poverty and hardship”¹. The current project is to end in late 2007.

¹ ADB Technical Assistance Report TAR:STU 36664, December 2003.

3. An assessment of the RPP to date is that there has been mixed success: data collection activities for poverty analysis have significantly improved, but poverty analysis capacity within PICTs remains limited. The RPP has either fully or partly funded Household Income and Expenditure Surveys (HIESs) in Fiji, Tuvalu, Kiribati and Palau and Participatory Poverty Assessments (PPAs) in Kiribati and the Solomon Islands². The RPP has also funded SPC Statistics Advisers to provide technical assistance to FSM. Through the SPC Statistics Advisers, the RPP has had good success with providing 'standard' data collection tools (questionnaires, code files etc) and technical assistance and training in sample selection, data collection, data processing, editing and output production. Since 2004 the RPP project has supported poverty analysis using HIES data in Fiji and Tuvalu but support to other countries has been constrained by a shortage of suitably experienced analysts in the region. However, with the HIES datasets now available and with the establishment of the UNDP Pacific Centre and the appointments in late 2005 of the Pacific Regional Macro Economic and Poverty Reduction Advisor and the Pacific Regional MDG Specialist regional capacity has significantly improved. The RPP has been working closely with UNDP on poverty analysis but additional technical expertise is still required, both at national and regional level.
4. Since 2004 the RPP has been run on a day to day basis by the Team Leader (David Abbott 2004-05 and Kim Robertson 2006-07) recruited on a 'part time' basis. Activities have therefore lacked some continuity and, in retrospect, RPP activities and outputs could have been improved if the Team Leader had been recruited on a permanent full time basis. Project activities have also been somewhat constrained by the lack of experienced poverty analysts in the wider Asia Pacific region. However SPC has been cooperating closely with UNDP in undertaking poverty analyses but there is still a broad lack of consulting capacity to undertake detailed and comprehensive economic analysis of poverty. The work done for Fiji and Tuvalu under the RPP, and the current analyses being undertaken for Solomon Islands and FSM, led by UNDP, provides a solid analytical base on which further detailed analysis of specific policy issues can be built; for example this would involve a detailed examination of characteristics of the poorest households, as well as of vulnerable groups, such as female-headed households, households with no regular income source, households reliant on remittances and so on".
5. HIES, on which poverty analysis is based, have been conducted in PICTs for many years but it is only since the commencement of the RPP that the data has begun to be analysed and used for identifying poverty indicators and informing broader issues of development policy. To make effective use of the considerable detail that is collected in HIES, it is necessary both that statisticians know what data analysis to provide to support policy development, and equally that planners and policy makers know what they should be requesting from the statisticians in the way of "evidence" to support the analysis of policy options.
6. The focus on poverty brings a new perspective to the analysis of HIES data. Poverty analysis is concerned firstly with the individual, then with the household. By ranking household expenditure or income by adult equivalent per capita, it is possible to obtain a clear indication of the relative status of households, between those that are poorest and those that are not so poor. Ranking households in this way enables other indicators in the HIES (housing status and conditions, age, gender, education attainment, access to services etc.) to be directly related to the "wealth" status of individual households.

² Earlier phases of ADB assistance supported assessments of hardship and poverty, including estimation of national poverty lines in FSM, Kiribati, Tonga, Samoa, and Tuvalu and PPA in FSM, Fiji, RMI, Tonga, Samoa, Tuvalu and Vanuatu, and PNG.

7. It is intended that such poverty analyses will provide input into the national planning process and inform the progress reporting of the national strategies and the achievement of the MDGs. Through the dissemination of national poverty analysis reports and the conduct of national workshops to present key findings and explore potential poverty alleviation strategies (the funding for which would be sought from donor partners), a wide range of stakeholders both in government and CSOs can be better informed of critical poverty issues. Since 2004 national poverty analysis reports have been drafted for Fiji and Tuvalu, these built on the assessments of hardship and poverty carried out in the earlier phases of the RPP. UNDP is presently assisting in the preparation of national poverty reports for Solomon Islands and FSM. These reports are providing key insights into what the complete HIES data could be used for in terms of its policy pointers.
8. NSO HIES and poverty analysis initiatives must be commended. In Fiji, the Cook Islands and the Solomon Islands key poverty data were included in main HIES statistical tabulation reports; in Solomon Islands a special health module was included in the questionnaire providing valuable insights into health/poverty linkages across age, gender and income; in Tuvalu a senior statistician conducted poverty analysis through a SIAP research attachment; and training attachments have been recently conducted at SPC for HIES tabulations with key poverty information for Kiribati, FSM, Nauru, Palau and Vanuatu.
9. The ADB, under earlier phases of the RPP, produced a series of Participatory Poverty (Hardship) Assessments which have generally been well received by national governments as valuable sources of information about civil society's perceptions of what hardship is, the causes of hardship and what strategies can be implemented to improve livelihoods. The RPP under SPC funded PPA studies in Kiribati (both English and I-Kiribati publications released by the ADB) and the Solomon Islands (the national workshop to finalise the report is planned). In the Solomon Islands it was hoped that a suitable national consultant would be able to conduct the study, but it was not possible to recruit someone with the required participatory poverty analysis experience and an international expert provided support. Again this is an area where Pacific regional expertise is limited.
10. The RPP draws to a close in late 2007 with ADB funding ceasing at that time. Key challenges remain to complete the poverty analysis reports for the participating countries. Discussions with the ADB and UNDP are ongoing about how this can be achieved, and whilst it may not be possible to complete all reports by end 2007 it is hoped that continuing support will be available at least through UNDP Pacific Centre for the future.
11. From a planning perspective the MDG indicators have an innate quantitative, 'tangible' appeal, with the focus on monitoring and evaluation of indicators to measure development progress. Extensions of this process are the estimation of the cost of reducing poverty and to measure aid effectiveness. As noted above, regional capacity for technical assistance and training for PICTs to achieve the MDGs has significantly improved through the UNDP Pacific Centre. Regional awareness of the MDGs, the broader framework of targets and indicators, the importance of localising the MDG indicators and the relationship between the MDG framework and national sustainable development strategies are apparent in many PICTs through specific UNDP and other donor projects and also activities of inter-agency groups such as the SPC/UN/CROP MDG Task Force.

12. To date, eight national MDG Task Forces have produced national MDG reports: Cook Islands, Fiji, PNG, RMI (a summary of existing statistical information), Samoa, Tonga, Tuvalu and Vanuatu. Support is presently being provided by UNDP to FSM, Kiribati and Palau towards the completion of their reports, with UNDP assisting RMI to produce a report in keeping with the UN MDG reporting guidelines. At the regional and international level the 2004 Pacific Region MDG Report remains the only one where statistical information, findings and conclusions were endorsed by national governments. Despite efforts of national MDG task forces and regional initiatives like PRISM and PopGIS to disseminate official national statistical information, problems continue with inconsistent statistical information across the region, and in some cases available country information is not being included in MDG reporting. This has led to inconsistent MDG indicators being used by different regional and international organisations.
13. To highlight the linkages between the MDG framework and national development strategies, consider the example of the SPC/UN/CROP MDG Task Force mission to Tuvalu. This mission was to identify the goals, objectives and strategies in the Tuvalu national development strategy which were compatible with the MDG framework, and to highlight gaps to be addressed in the national development strategy. In addition, new targets were identified and indicators developed within the MDG framework to 'localise' the framework for Tuvalu's development priorities. SPC and UNDP also provided funding for the preparation of the Tuvalu national MDG report and UNDP is presently providing support to Kiribati, FSM, RMI and Palau. SPC also undertook to introduce the MDG framework to Pacific Island French and United States territories, and held a workshop to adapt the MDG framework to territory development framework monitoring needs. Territories have been tasked with compiling the statistical information for national monitoring, with the SPC incorporating this information in a special MDG report for the territories when the information is available.
14. In October 2006 UNDP organised a second Regional MDG workshop (the first having been held in 2003), to review progress and take stock as the halfway point in the period for achieving the MDGs approached. This workshop called on the resources of the RPP and involved other regional as well as other UN agencies. Building on this a sub-regional workshop, focusing on costing and budgeting for the MDGs, was convened for northern Pacific countries in June 2007, and a second such sub-regional workshop is planned primarily for Melanesian countries in November.

DISCUSSION POINTS

The meeting is invited to comment on:

- a) The primary focus of technical support for PICT poverty analysis, MDG reporting and integrating benchmarks and indicators into national sustainable development strategies (NSDS) is, and should be, on country needs;
- b) Type of strategies and resources required to enable achievements of RPP objectives: in particular:
 - Are additional resources required, and if so, where may they be sourced from, to replace those ceasing with the completion of the ADB RPP in order to complete national poverty analysis reports for Kiribati, Palau, the Solomon Islands (and possibly other interested countries)?
 - Should alternative modalities to detailed national poverty analysis reports be adopted, such as identifying and reporting on a core set of poverty related indicators (including the MDGs)?

- c) The adequacy of support over the past 3 years for countries to produce national MDG reports, and incorporate MDGs in their national development frameworks, and if this should remain a high priority area for assistance;
- d) The most effective means, for PICT NSOs and NPOs, to disseminate official national statistics for use by national, regional and international organisations;
- e) The continued desirability to produce a Pacific island territories' regional MDG report, and on the likelihood of territories disseminating MDG and other development indicators.