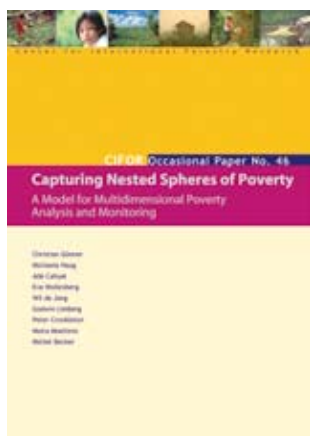




Children helping with the Brazil nut harvest in Pando, Bolivia (Amy Duchelle); Punan hunter gatherers in East Kalimantan, Indonesia (Edmond Dounias); tree-felling in Sarawak, Malaysia (Christian Gönner).

A new way to assess poverty



If local governments are to reduce poverty successfully, they need to know who the poor are, how poor they are, where they live and why they are poor.

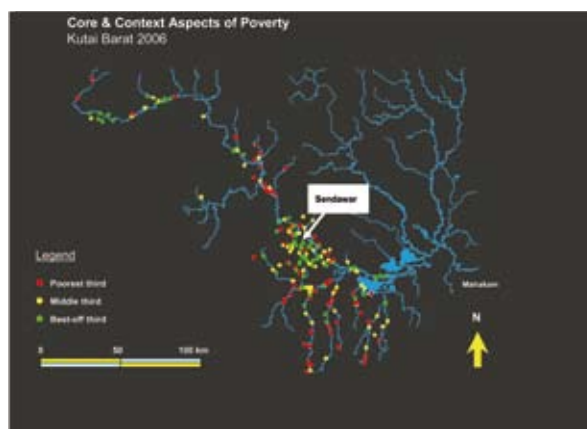
Most international agencies and governments still use money-metric poverty measures, the best known of which defines extreme poverty as having an income of less than US\$1 a day. The problem with measures like this is that they fail to acknowledge the complexity of poverty. Poverty is about a lack of many things besides money, including food, education and health care. “Poverty is also highly subjective,” explains CIFOR consultant Christian Gönner, “and it can be influenced by feelings of exclusion, shame, vulnerability and other things you can’t put precise figures to.”

People may consider themselves poor even when they are well above the poverty lines used by international agencies. Take, for example, the Dayaks living in East Kalimantan, in Indonesian Borneo, where Gönner and a team of CIFOR scientists have been developing a new methodology to assess poverty. People living in remote villages may earn a reasonable income, for example through the exploitation of valuable non-timber forest products such as swiftlets’ nests, the raw material for Chinese soup, and incense-bearing *gahuru* wood. “But many of these people think they are living at the end of the world,” says Gönner, “and if you ask them to make a subjective assessment of their well-being, it’s often very low.”

If local governments are to reduce poverty successfully, they need to know who the poor are, how poor they are, where they live and why they are poor. A major CIFOR project, ‘Making local government more responsive to the poor’, focused on two districts in East Kalimantan and three municipalities in Bolivia and developed new tools to help local governments assess and tackle poverty. An Occasional Paper – *Capturing Nested Spheres of Poverty* – explains how the methodology was derived.

The term ‘nested spheres of poverty’ doesn’t exactly trip off the tongue, but it does acknowledge the many dimensions of poverty. Following interviews with 10,000 households in 223 villages in Kutai Barat in East Kalimantan, and similar exercises in Bolivia, Gönner and his colleagues came up with a three-layered model. At the centre is subjective well-being, which is influenced by a plethora of factors related to happiness, safety and the comparison of one’s own living standards with that of others. This is surrounded by a core of health, wealth and knowledge, which measures such things as access to medical care, education and skills training – all the sorts of things you need to escape poverty. This is set within a sphere which evaluates the enabling environments which provide the support people need to escape poverty.

The model becomes meaningful only when local poverty indicators are set within each of these spheres. These need to be simple to use, adapted to local conditions and capable of measuring poverty over time. In Kutai Barat, the process of establishing what the indicators should be, and



Mapping subjective wellbeing in Kutai Barat.



Local women in Setulang village, Malinau, East Kalimantan (Eko Prianto); sorting rattan and fishing in Kutai Barat, East Kalimantan (Christian Gönner).

how they should be scored, involved over 60 focus group discussions, various workshops and in-depth community studies. In addition to this, the researchers developed other tools which enable local-government officers to identify poverty hot spots and the areas where they need to focus their activities.

One of the problems with national poverty reduction strategies is that they tend to be highly centralised in their approach, and while they may suit one area they may be inappropriate to others. “Some of the central government’s poverty indicators don’t make sense at the local level,” explains CIFOR researcher Godwin Limberg. For example, living in a house with a dirt floor is one of central government’s poverty indicators, yet in a town like Malinau nobody has a dirt floor, although plenty of people are poor. “Instead of using dirt floors as an indicator of poverty in Malinau,” explains Limberg, “we looked at other factors, such as the condition of dwellings, the type of timber used for flooring, the type of roof and so on.”

The indicators devised by the CIFOR research projects are now being used by the local district government, and the methodology developed in Kutai Barat and Bolivia should help to satisfy the high demand for approaches tailored to particular areas. “It may sound complicated, but we found that it was relatively cheap to gather multi-dimensional data about poverty and to convert it for the use of policy-makers,” says Gönner.

Local-government officials in Kutai Barat were closely involved in the project, and other local governments are now adopting a similar approach. GTZ, the German development agency, is also using this approach in several districts in Indonesia. A source book for local government officers – *Towards Wellbeing in Forest Communities* – provides an overview of the methodology and shows how it can be used to monitor poverty and household well-

being. It also looks at the ways in which scenario-based planning can help local governments better understand the needs of communities.



Children catching fish in swamp forest, East Kalimantan, Indonesia. (Christian Gönner)