The Social and Economic Dimensions of Rural Poverty in the Province of Masbate

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This study analyzed the rural poverty phenomenon in Masbate, the poorest of the eighty provinces in the Philippines in more than a decade, with poverty incidence of 51.0% in 2006. The province has been in the list of top ten poorest in the country since 1997, ranking first in 2000, third in 2003, and eighth in 2006. Seven of the ten poorest in 2000 were able to cast off their “poorest” tags in 2003, majority registering double-digit declines in their poverty incidences. On the other hand, Masbate and two others remained in the list, with Masbate as the only province which had consistently been in the ten poorest since 1997.¹

Problem

The investigation gathered social and economic indicators of poverty and analyzed the statistical data based on a theoretical framework introduced by Robert Chambers (Swanepoel, 2003)². It answered the following questions: (1) What is the status of poverty and deprivation in Masbate in terms of the following: (a) poverty; (b) physical weakness; (c) isolation; (d) vulnerability; and (e) powerlessness; (2) How does poverty relate to social indicators of deprivation?; (3) How have local government units addressed economic and social indicators of poverty? (4) What policy recommendations can the study infer to alleviate poverty in the province?

Scope and Delimitation

The study covered twenty municipalities and one city of Masbate. Since the inquiry primarily used secondary data, it was limited to available information ranging within the period 2003 to 2006 only. It was constrained by wide distances among the twenty-one municipalities of the province, the unstable political situation, insurgency and violence in the study area, and the natural calamities that frequently beset the island province. Data-gathering was conducted in the last quarter of 2007 and first quarter of 2008.

Significance of the Study

In the past decade, poverty researches have expanded significantly to include economic and social indicators. Aside from income, consumption and productive assets which are economic measures,

¹ National Statistical Coordination Board (2008), Government of the Philippines.
examples of social indicators are nutrition, sanitation, access to safe drinking water, morbidity, access to electricity, school enrollment rates, literacy rates, access to healthcare, infant mortality, access to opportunities, access to land and credit, participation in decision-making, infrastructure and access to markets. Moreover, researchers and policy makers increasingly construct geographically disaggregated indicators that provide information about spatial distribution of inequality and poverty within a country or region. Geographical aspects of poverty have become an important component of poverty research and policy analysis.

Poverty and inequality are multidimensional issues. Although monetary indicators are widely considered as the most reliable measures of poverty, social and structural indicators describe facets of human well being that are not easily captured by purely economic measures. In response to these challenges, this inquiry utilized multidimensional indicators of deprivation and spatial poverty measures. This investigation is relevant to theory-building because it aims to validate the Deprivation Trap Theory by Robert Chambers in the specific milieu of the twenty-one municipalities of Masbate. If patterns are observed, then it can be inferred how poverty is aggravated. On the other hand, breakdowns in the pattern of deprivation may open up windows of possible policy interventions where communities can free themselves from the deprivation trap and gradually emerge from the chains of poverty.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework is primarily based on the Deprivation Trap Theory of Chambers. According to the theory, the poor is trapped in a cycle of poverty called the deprivation trap. There are five clusters of disadvantage among poor households: (a) they are poor; (b) physically weak; (c) isolated; (d) vulnerable; and (e) powerless.

Poverty determines all the other clusters of disadvantage because it contributes to: (a) physical weakness because of lack of food and poor health; (b) isolation because of the inability to pay for education; (c) vulnerability because of lack of assets and inability to meet contingencies such as illness; and (d) powerlessness because of the low status that goes with lack of wealth. Physical weakness contributes to poverty through inability to engage in income-generating activities and less opportunities for those who are physically weak. Isolation is typically illustrated by a lack of proper education, remoteness and being out of contact with the wider world. The isolation of the poor sustains their poverty because social services do not reach those who are living in remote areas. Vulnerability relates to poverty because the lack of assets for humane living and livelihood. Powerlessness contributes to poverty through limiting or preventing access to resources, there is a lack of legal redress for abuses, and enhances the weakness of the poor in the negotiations.

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4 Ibid.
This study determined correlation among the economic and social indicators of the five clusters of deprivation to validate the statements of the Deprivation Trap Theory. It also observed inconsistencies between the claims of the theory and the actual condition of the municipalities. The conclusions to be drawn from this process will pave the way toward formulation of policies and strategies that would help communities break away from the deprivation trap.

Research Methodology

The investigation employed written document analysis, for the analysis of economics and social indicators; and key informant interview, for the validation of the indicators and the development programs of local government units. The unit of analysis was the municipality. The community profiles were derived from the provincial and municipal planning and development offices, government agencies, National Statistical Coordination Board (2008), Peace and Equity Foundation, Inc. (2007) and Kapit-Bisig Laban sa Kahirapan – Comprehensive and Integrated Delivery of Social Services: Kapangyarihan at Kaunlaran sa Barangay (2006). Other secondary data used were annual investment plans, memoranda, announcements, written reports and news clippings. The data was processed using frequency distribution tables, computation of percentage, and Pearson’s correlation statistics.

Findings

1. Based on the economic indicator of poverty, of the twenty-one municipalities of Masbate, San Pascual is the poorest with 75.52%, followed by Cawayan 74.01%, Placer 72.11% and Claveria 69.79%. Based on one social indicator index, the PEF development index, the lowest belongs to San Pascual, Cawayan and Claveria. Based on a second social indicator index, KALAHI-CIDSS KKB municipal ranking, San Pascual is again found at the bottom, followed by Monreal, Cawayan and Milagros.

2. The study discovered positive and negative correlations between economic and social indicators of poverty in four clusters of deprivation – physical weakness, isolation, vulnerability and powerlessness – based on the Deprivation Trap Theory of Robert Chambers (2003). Under physical weakness, income indicator was positively correlated with malnutrition, infant mortality

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6 Small area poverty incidence estimates obtained from the National Statistical Coordination Board (2006), Government of the Philippines.

7 Determined by the Peace and Equity Foundation, Inc. (2007) based on several aspects such as access to potable water, access to sanitary toilet, nutrition, infant and maternal survival, chosen by PEF based on its development thrust and mandate.

8 Determined by the Kapit-Bisig Laban sa Kahirapan – Comprehensive and Integrated Delivery of Social Services: Kapangyarihan at Kaunlaran sa Barangay (2006), based on quality of human capital, housing and amenities and access to center of trade.

and maternal mortality rates, proportion of households without access to potable water and proportion of households without access to sanitary toilets. Under isolation, poverty incidence had negative correlation with school participation and cohort survival rates. Economic indicator had positive correlation with dropout rate and distance from the commercial center. In terms of vulnerability, income poverty was positively correlated with proportion of households with makeshift housing and negatively correlated with proportion of households with house owned/amortized, proportion of households with lot owned/amortized, proportion of households with strong wall materials, proportion of households with strong roof materials and proportion of households with at least one household convenience. Poverty incidence had negative correlation with number of non-government organizations in the area, number of cooperatives, estimated internal revenue allotment per capita and income class, number of crimes against person and property.

3. The government’s development programs included: (a) construction, improvement, rehabilitation of public buildings, roads, bridges, sea ports, schools and market; (b) development of fish sanctuary; (c) health, nutrition program; (d) potable waterworks system; (e) updating municipal framework plan and socio-economic profile; (f) maintenance of animal breeding station; (g) Animal Health Protection Program; (h) Self-Employment Assistance-Kaunlaran Program; (i) Comprehensive and Integrated Delivery of Social Services; (j) Women’s Organization of San Pascual; (k) Food for School Program; (l) barangay integrated waste management; (m) formulation of fire zone map; (n) relocation of pollutive industries.

4. Development programs should be genuine and transformative rather than mere political propaganda and dole out. They should put primary importance to community organizing, mainly to raise people’s socio-political awareness and develop their sense of purpose. The organizing should empower people in deciding for themselves, confronting and resolving their own problems and setting their own life directions.

Conclusion

The study proved the following: (a) income poverty and physical weakness intensify each other; (b) isolation play a big part in poverty of communities; (c) poverty perpetuates poor quality of housing and deprives families of owning house and lot, eventually perpetuating vulnerability; (d) absence/lack of cooperatives and non-government organizations, low internal revenue allotment and low income class contribute to poverty and therefore aggravates powerlessness. Isolation and powerlessness cut across all levels – province, municipal, barangay and household. Vulnerability is aggravated by severe inequality in ownership and control of resources. Powerlessness is systematically strengthened by the existing set-up – few clans holding both economic and political power.

There are development plans at the provincial and municipal levels, complete with data and documentation but mainly cater to physical weakness, a little to isolation and questionably to vulnerability and powerlessness. There is very minimal intervention to break the deprivation trap. Moreover, programs clearly did not trickle down to municipalities, especially the poorest
barangays and households which remain terribly isolated. The barangay councils do not have their own barangay-level development plans due to lack of education and skills of barangay officials.

Policy recommendations forwarded by the study are consolidated into an integrated plan to respond to four clusters of poverty based on Chambers’ Deprivation Trap. The development plan has four components: (1) governance capacity and institutional development; (2) sectoral development; (3) program and service delivery management; and (4) community organizing and values formation. The first ascertains that governance and government structures are truthful and effective so that the needs of the poorest will be met and the second component (agriculture, water, electricity) is strengthened. The third must ensure that the poor will benefit directly from the provision of basic services and livelihood opportunities, the government’s continuing role, while people are empowered through the fourth component, giving them the capacity to stand on their own and emerge from poverty on a sustained basis.