

## Poverty and the Environment: What the Poor Say

The environment is crucial to poor people - in terms of their health, security, earning capacity, physical surroundings, peace of mind, as well as their access to and control of environmental services and resources. This is demonstrated by a recent review of 23 Participatory Poverty Assessments (PPAs) and other qualitative studies. Key messages include:

**Poor people are acutely aware of the effects of poor environmental health on their ability to move out of poverty.**

A healthy environment is a key indicator of well being. Poor environmental conditions - both in the home and the workplace - impact negatively on poor people with implications for their ability to pursue their livelihoods. Poverty and livelihood insecurity force poor men and women to work in environmentally dangerous jobs.

**Poor people clearly express their concern for and feeling of vulnerability in the face of environmental shocks and stresses.**

The impact of these shocks contributes to their falling into poverty or to moving down to a lower state of well being. Natural disasters, for example, often lead to land loss, food insecurity and trigger migration. Environmental shocks and stresses affect different people in different ways and consequently impact on their well being to a greater or lesser extent.

**The poor are under no illusions about how power and their lack of it both underpin well being and shape their relationship with the environment.**

Poor people's powerlessness and low status limit their control and access to environmental resources and services. Certain groups such as women, the elderly and minorities are particularly disadvantaged.

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**Declining environmental conditions have significant impacts on poor people's lives.**

Significantly for poor people, common property resources (CPRs) are in decline. Their dependence on CPRs as a safety net means that the loss of access to these resources contribute to their poverty and exacerbate their vulnerability.

**Changes in access to environmental goods and services increase the time burdens faced in merely ensuring household survival.**

Women and children tend to bear the brunt. For example, Kenyan female villagers walk up to seven hours to collect a bucket of water from a (polluted) river. Inadequate rest increases vulnerability to mental stress, chronic ill health and disease. It also reduces opportunities to build strong social networks and makes it difficult to access information and public support services.

**Institutional structures and processes from micro level up to macro level are important influencing factors in how poor people are able to control, manage and access environmental resources.**

Poor people's marginalisation restricts their access to vital information, markets and public officials. Governments' priorities are considered by some to threaten poor people's urban and rural security. Furthermore, the institutional context influences the extent to which poor people could mitigate against and recover from disaster - the poorest are often excluded from benefits.

**Copies of the full report: 'Poverty and the Environment: What the poor Say' are available from the Public Enquiry Point, DFID: [enquiry@dfid.gov.uk](mailto:enquiry@dfid.gov.uk), tel 0845 300 4100 (UK), +44 1355 84 3132 (from overseas).**

**and at:**

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*"In the absence of credit, poor people indicated that they turned to greater exploitation of the natural environment because it was the only resource that was 'free' "*  
(Tanzania, *Voices of the Poor*).

*"In the monsoons there is no difference between the land in front of our house and the public drain."*  
(India 1999)

**Table 1: Summary Characteristics of Ill-being/Well-being in Relation to the Environment**

Food Security and Production Activities	Natural Resource Assets	Physical Surroundings and Environmental Health	Social and Political Assets
<p><b>Food Security</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Key indicator of well-being. Different levels of well-being were categorised according to changes in levels of food intake over time and cross referenced with causes and effects of food insecurity.</li> </ul> <p><b>Agriculture and Land</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Accessibility to enough land to secure or supplement food intake in both rural and urban areas</li> <li>Secure tenure over land viewed as particularly important by women in some countries.</li> <li>Quality and location of productive land-if the poor had access to land they were dependent on marginal lands not easily accessible.</li> <li>Ability to diversify farming systems (eg mix of food and cash crops) an important indicator of well-being in rural areas - seen as a guard against vulnerability to seasonal food scarcity</li> <li>Access to agricultural inputs (finances and availability)</li> <li>Capacity to engage in agricultural and marketing activities. Indicators of ill-being commonly raised included physical isolation, labour and financial constraints as major barriers to securing well-being in rural areas.</li> </ul> <p><b>Livestock</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>In rural areas owning livestock almost universally a sign of well-being. Livestock equated with status and security. The very poor often characterised as lacking potential to invest in livestock.</li> </ul>	<p><b>Water</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Accessibility to adequate quantity and quality water for productive and domestic use.</li> <li>Ease of collection (physical proximity and all weather access)</li> <li>Secure ownership and control over water source.</li> <li>Ability to pay for water (especially in urban areas.</li> <li>Capacity to maintain water systems often regarded as indicator of communal wellbeing.</li> </ul> <p><b>Energy Supplies</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Type and quality of fuel available.</li> <li>Ease of access to securing sufficient quantities of energy supplies for cooking and heating important indicator of well-being.</li> <li>Ability to pay for fuel especially in urban areas.</li> <li>Household member engaged in fuel collection fulltime often indicator for ill-being.</li> </ul> <p><b>Common Property Resources</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>In rural areas, access to a range of CPRs for consumption and sale was viewed as crucial for well-being security, particularly during periods of stress.</li> <li>Heavy reliance on CPR for survival indicated a sign of ill-being.</li> </ul>	<p><b>Living Conditions</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Unhealthy surrounding environment was perceived as an obvious sign of ill-being.</li> <li>Overcrowding, and density of housing, key signs of ill-being in urban areas.</li> <li>Poor ventilation, and in Russia inadequate heating systems, linked to chronic ill health and ill-being.</li> <li>Security or peace of mind often linked to surrounding physical environment. e.g. in urban areas well kept roads and presence of street lighting equated with reduction in crime and street accidents.</li> </ul> <p><b>Sanitation</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Key indicator of well-being. More commonly raised in urban areas but also in some rural areas.</li> <li>Existence and maintenance of sanitation especially in urban areas sign of community and individual well-being.</li> <li>High levels of hygiene in and around settlement indicator of wealth and well-being</li> <li>In urban areas regularity of flooding of habitation and poor drainage linked to ill-being.</li> </ul> <p><b>Physical Space</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Physical isolation because of poor transport systems (urban squatter areas and rural), seasonal inaccessibility (rural and to a lesser degree urban), geographical remoteness (rural) often related to chronic ill-being because of restricted access to public goods and services and markets.</li> <li>Location of house within settlement also equated to well-being. The better off living closer to means of production was raised in both urban (more common) and rural areas.</li> </ul>	<p><b>Social Capital</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Social assets perceived as instrumental in securing access to environmental resources in both rural and urban areas.</li> </ul> <p><b>Political Capital</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Ill-being characterised by lack of power or voice at local and higher decision-making levels. Women often raised lack of control over environmental management decisions such as use of land, choice of agricultural practices as major barriers to securing well-being. Young men in urban areas commonly raised lack of political voice as an impediment to improving physical surroundings e.g. upgrading sanitation</li> </ul> <p><b>Information flows</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Access to information equated to well-being. Poor and women commonly perceived as being marginalised from information networks relating to land management, agricultural extension, municipal upgrading and markets.</li> </ul>