

Method 4: Slow Impoverishing Forces

Purpose

“Slow processes,” as well as sudden shocks or crises, can effectively impoverish individuals, households and communities. Examples include degradation of productive resources (e.g. pasture, fisheries, fields), the erosion of commodity prices (e.g. cash crops, cattle, fish, labour) and, in some cases, becoming elderly...

This Activity helps us:

- Identify forces that slowly push individuals, households and communities toward poverty
- Assess the frequency (or prevalence) and severity of these shocks/crises
- Understand *how* they cause an increase in poverty
- Learn how people respond to these impoverishing forces

Due to its less obvious subject, this Activity is most easily conducted with the same people that participated in the Discussion Group on “Impoverishing Shocks/Crises.”

Process

Step 1: Form a Discussion Group of 68 persons with roughly equal numbers of like-aged, outspoken women and men. The Activity will run more smoothly if conducted with the people previously involved in exploring Impoverishing Shocks/Crises. Then:

- Explain the Activity’s purpose and procedures
- Create a three-column matrix
- Review the locally relevant “slow impoverishing forces” identified by participants in the 1st Community Meeting. Agree to use, add and/or subtract from this list. As each slow-force is agreed upon, have participants write it down/place its symbol in the first column.

Note: The Facilitator should challenge participants to identify forces pertaining to:

- Human conditions (e.g. long-term illness, having children, becoming elderly, children leaving home, disintegration of social capital)
- Material conditions (e.g. slow loss of productive and reproductive assets)
- Environmental conditions (e.g. decline in the quality/quantity of productive resources, diminishing/unpredictable rains)
- Economic conditions (e.g. erosion of commodity process versus consumables)
- Livelihood related conditions (e.g. the loss of a boat, livestock epidemics, crop loss due to pests or unemployment)

Ultimately, the result might look something like this:

| | | |
|---|--|--|
| Slow Impoverishing Forces | | |
| HIV/AIDS | | |
| Declining soil fertility | | |
| Decreasing prices paid for agricultural commodities | | |
| ... | | |

Step 2: The Discussion Group’s next task is to score the *prevalence* and severity (at the household level) of each impoverishing force.

In practice, the Activity works best if “prevalence” is scored relatively and “severity” is scored absolutely. Thus, on a scale of 1 to 5, those forces that affect all local households are given 5 (regardless of how often this is in absolute terms). Meanwhile, the *severity* of shocks is scored so that:

- 1 = the shock sometimes leads to a small increase in household poverty
- 2 = the shock sometimes leads to a moderate increase in household poverty
- 3 = the shock ordinarily leads to a significant increase in household poverty
- 4 = the shock ordinarily leads to a dramatic increase in household poverty
- 5 = the shock ordinarily leads to destitution

Thus, participants might develop a matrix appearing something like this:

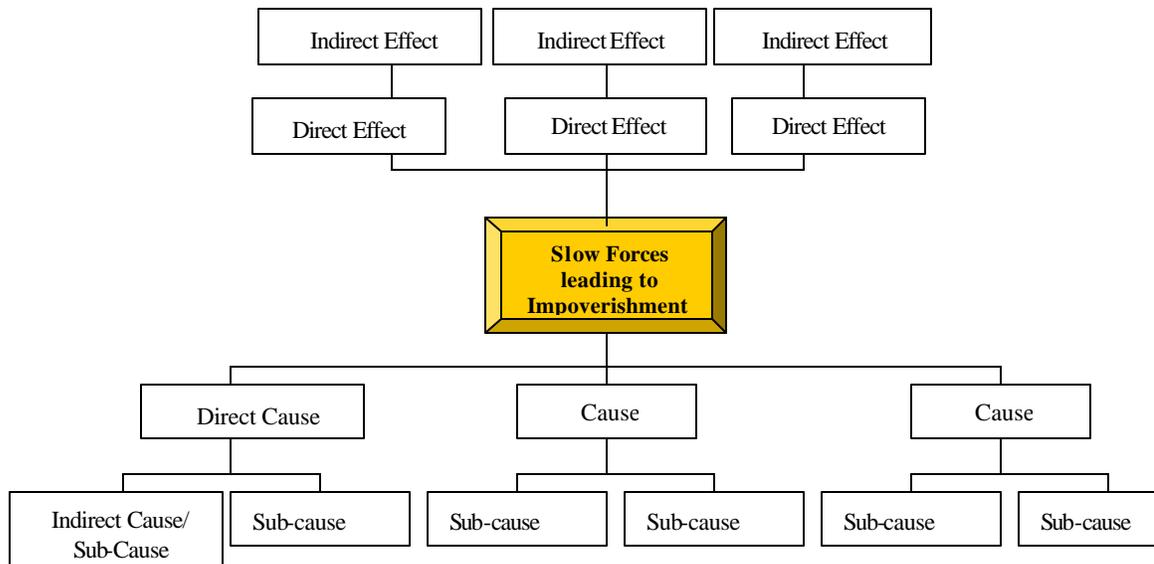
| Slow Impoverishing Forces | Prevalence | Severity |
|---|------------|----------|
| HIV/AIDS | 2 | 5 |
| Declining soil fertility | 5 | 4 |
| Decreasing prices paid for agricultural commodities | 5 | 3 |
| ... | ... | ... |

Scores can be made using any marker (e.g. pebbles or thorns – people seem to prefer hard/sharp things to use in this exercise!) that participants choose.

Step 3: Discussion Group participants should provide a summary interpretation of the matrix they developed. In particular, they should be able to identify the most prevalent/pervasive trigger and the most serious force.

Step 4: This matrix is a *starting point* for Group reflection on, and analysis of the most pervasive and severe slow impoverishing forces. The two major issues to explore are:

1. How do these forces directly *and indirectly* contribute to impoverishment?



In many cases, participants will be able to develop “Analysis Trees.” People find this fun to draw— literally showing the “causes” as roots and “effects” as green leaves.

2. Are some individuals or households more vulnerable to these forces than others? Which ones? Why? Note: the “Community Map” may be a useful resource to help focus this discussion.

Step 5: Now, explore the coping mechanisms that people employ at individual, household and/or community levels to:

- ❑ Decrease vulnerability to the impoverishing force (by, for example, growing flexible crops in areas where unreliable rainfall is the norm)
- ❑ Stop the force from occurring (by, for example, preventing HIV/AIDS through safe-sex practices, etc.)
- ❑ Lessen the force’s impact (by, for example, diversifying sources of income in areas subject to diminishing agricultural returns)

Of course, there might not be effective coping mechanisms for some kinds of impoverishing forces. But, this is exactly what the exercise can teach us!

In some cases, you may be able to enter brief descriptions of these coping mechanisms directly into the Activity Matrix.

| Local Shocks/Crises | Frequency | Severity | Coping Mechanisms |
|---|-----------|----------|-------------------|
| HIV/AIDS | | | |
| Declining soil fertility | | | |
| Decreasing prices paid for agricultural commodities | | | |
| ... | | | |

Note well: It may be necessary to explore “coping mechanisms” through a separate Activity. When participants become too tired or have other engagements, bring this Discussion to a close.