

Poverty in Rural Samoa: Reasons and Strategies

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Abstract

Rural poverty is considered an issue in Samoa and a range of government policies have been put in place to reduce or alleviate poverty. If such policies are to be well-targeted and effective, a sound understanding of rural poverty from the perspective of the poor is necessary. This study used a grounded theory approach to determine why rural people became poor, the strategies used by the poor to manage their situation, and the constraints they faced when trying to improve their situation and move out of poverty. People became poor because of events related to personal circumstances, social obligations, and external shocks such as natural or economic events. However, once they became poor, safety nets stopped their situation from getting worse. On reaching these safety nets, some people remained poor long-term and were unable to improve their situation. For others, poverty was more transitory, and they were able to move out of poverty and remain out of poverty. Some rural poor proved to be more vulnerable, being able to move out of poverty temporarily, but subsequently becoming poor again. The study demonstrated that government policies, and village and community efforts to reduce poverty could be better targeted to the specific needs of each group.

Key Words: Rural poverty, Samoa, poverty strategies

Introduction

In the last 40 years, a range of government-led economic development strategies and policies have been put in place by the Government of Samoa to improve the well-being of its people, including the livelihoods of its rural people. These policies followed international trends, and included a trickle-down development approach during the 1960's, integrated rural development programs, price stabilisation programs, incentive schemes and subsidies in the 1970's, crop diversification and agricultural commercialisation in the 1980's, and market reforms from the 1990's (ADB, 1980; O'Meara, 1986; Fairbairn, 1991; Burrows et al, 1991; Government of Samoa, 1995; Government of Samoa, 1998). However, it has been suggested that these policies have not necessarily alleviated or reduced rural poverty, and that some of the more recent policies may have exacerbated poverty and income inequality (Johnson and Dhal, 1997; ADB, 2000).

By world standards, Samoa performs comparatively well in terms of conventional indices of development, such as per capita income and human development, and the country's strong social support system, which involves cooperating and sharing, offers support for the rural poor (ADB 1999a; ADB 1999b). However, its isolation and remoteness from markets, its small population and limited natural resources relative to larger Pacific countries indicate that the country may be vulnerable to poverty through its limited capacity to absorb the impact of unexpected external shocks and natural disasters (ADB; 1980; Fairbairn, 1991; Burrows et al, 1991; Johnson and Dahl, 1997; Tisdell, 2000).

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If government policies to alleviate rural poverty are to be effective, then they must be well-targeted to poor rural Samoans and the environment within which they operate. This requires a sound understanding of rural poverty from the perspective of the poor. The objectives of this study were to determine why rural Samoan people became poor, the strategies used by them to manage their situation, and the constraints they faced when trying to improve their situation and move out of poverty.

Methodology

A classical grounded theory approach (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Strauss and Corbin, 1990) was used to achieve the objectives of the study and to explore the interrelationships between them. Twenty-five respondents from rural areas in the four inhabited islands of Samoa (Upolu, Savaii, Manono and Apolima) were interviewed. Entry to the first site was gained, and thereafter, a process of theoretical sampling was used to identify subsequent respondents. Interviewing took place from mid-June to late-August 2002.

Customary approval to undertake the research and to interview potential respondents was sought from villages in a customary way. Interviews were conducted in Samoan, and questions were relatively unstructured, though based on a generalised checklist that captured issues that had been identified in the literature. Following each interview, a self-debriefing occurred, and before leaving a village, discussion was held with some village people in order to understand the wider context. The first set of interviews was fully analysed, emerging themes identified, and questions refined for the next set of interviews. This approach continued until saturation was reached. In order to validate the results, key informants were selected and the emerging conclusions discussed with them.

Results

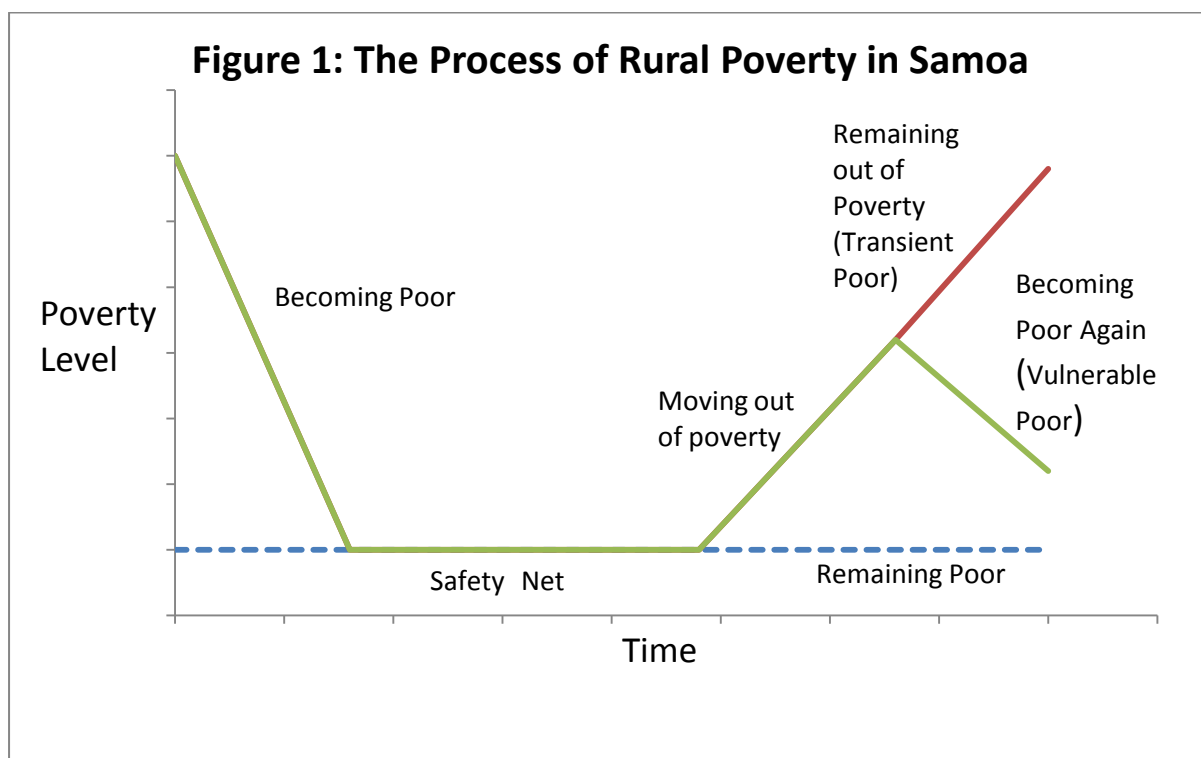
Becoming Poor

As a result of their social system of sharing and cooperation, rural Samoans have access to the natural resources of the land and sea. Hence, poverty in rural Samoa was not considered by the poor themselves as food poverty in the sense of being unable to access food staples, although periods of temporary food shortage could arise in periods of natural disaster. Instead, poverty in rural Samoa was associated with a lack of household assets, particular consumer items and community facilities. Poverty was also viewed as an inability to meet a range of social obligations because of lack of wealth. Lack of income, income-earning ability and savings was characteristic of those who considered themselves as rural poor.

The dynamic process of rural poverty in Samoa is summarised in Figure 1. It outlines a process of becoming poor before hitting safety nets, and then following one of three paths over time. The first of these paths represents those who become poor and remain poor. The second and third paths are initially similar, characterised by those who become poor, but who managed to subsequently move out of poverty. These paths then diverged with some people managing to remain out of poverty, while others found that they were unable to sustain this improvement and subsequently falling back into poverty again.

Three types of events were associated with people becoming poor. These were events related to personal circumstances, events related to social obligations, and external economic or natural events. There appears to be an event that pushes people into poverty, which can then be reinforced by the occurrence of other predisposing events. With respect to personal events, illness and associated disabilities, marriage into a poor family and events relating to personal behaviour were all associated with becoming poor, resulting in a loss of income or a reduction in income-earning ability. Social obligations were also associated with becoming poor, since such obligations can lead to

people depleting their savings or selling household or income-earning assets to meet their obligations. This becomes particularly problematic when confronted with multiple events, such as funerals and bestowal of titles, over a short time period. People can also become poor because they are vulnerable to external natural events such as cyclones, tsunami, crop pest and disease outbreaks, drought and bushfire. They are also vulnerable to external economic events, such as global recessions, falling product prices and higher input prices. These external events can lead to loss of income and reduce or deplete their ability to earn income.



Although rural people can fall into poverty because of such events, their position stabilises at a certain point when they reach the safety nets. Such safety nets can include getting support from others, semi-subsistence activities and temporary employment. Support from others includes asking for support or being offered it by village members, participating in special village social and cultural occasions, receiving support from family members, particularly remittances, and state aid such as pensions or disaster relief. Semi-subsistence activities are possible because of access to communal land and sea resources, which allows them to gather food, while semi-subsistence farming also ensures that their situation does not worsen. In some cases, it might be possible to find temporary employment with wealthier families by accessing community networks.

Remaining Poor

The first poverty path is remaining poor. Those people who remain poor are unable to get money from others to build up their financial reserves, cannot get well-paying jobs and are unlikely to be able to build up a small business from semi-subsistence activities. They may also find that any meagre financial reserves that they are able to accumulate become depleted by their social obligations.

Being unable to get financial support from others can occur because they lack family support and they may have fractured family ties. They may not have the opportunity to assist some of their children to go abroad to work and so have no access to remittances. In some instances, remittances received might not be used in a way that could reduce the chances of climbing out of poverty. An inability to get a well-paying job might arise because of the lack of jobs in rural areas, they cannot

work because of illness or disability, or they lack the necessary education. This lack of education might occur because parents withdraw their children from school because they rely on them for livelihood support or they cannot pay their school fees. In some instances, the children may not wish to continue their education and village rules to ensure that they do so might not be enforced.

Being unable to build up financial reserves from semi-subsistence activities will make it difficult to move out of poverty. This may be coupled with difficulty in accessing credit, which could occur if they are unable to meet loan criteria or repayments, have insufficient assets to offer as security, or have insufficient knowledge about available loans. They may not have some necessary business skills or commitment to building a business, and may also lack access to resources such as family labour, good quality land, and capital. Social obligations might also place a strain on their financial reserves.

Those who remain poor are more likely to be isolated from decision-making and from community facilities, such as schools and roads, credit facilities and markets. They can lack voice and find it difficult to receive support and can also lack education because of their isolation. Physical isolation can also make it difficult to get a well-paying job or to build up a business.

Moving Out of Poverty

Although the situation remained dire for those who could not get out of poverty, by contrast there were individuals who managed to get out of poverty. Such people were able to employ both short- and long-term strategies, which allowed them to emerge from poverty by building up a business from semi-subsistence, getting money from others and building up their savings, reducing their social obligations and using their family resources strategically.

These people were able to transform semi-subsistence activities into businesses through a series of steps. For example, one strategy was to sell coconuts to accumulate income, and then use this income to raise chickens and pigs and cultivate both food and marketable crops if they have access to land. The sale of marketable crops gives them a source of income, while their food crops and small livestock give them a high degree of self-sufficiency and self-reliance. As their wealth continues to improve through this strategy, they eventually find that they might be in a position to acquire a cattle herd. A different strategic approach was taken by those who did not have such favourable access to land or who live on the smaller islands. Such people will sell fish and engage in value-adding activities, such as selling cooked food and handicrafts.

Those who were able to move out of poverty were able to access micro-credit schemes, or grants for small business or government incentive schemes. They tended to have strong family networks from which they could access resources, including remittances. Some attempted to reduce their social obligations by changing religion. They carefully managed their expenditure, including education, obligations and expenditure on household assets, and were able to build up savings for further investment in their business enterprise.

Those who were on this path were able to use their family resources strategically. For example, some family members concentrated on farming and fishing, others made and sold handicrafts, and others migrated to urban areas or abroad to obtain work. In some cases, education of some family members was considered a long-term family investment, while other family members were withdrawn from education much earlier to help with immediate income support.

Associated with this ability to move out of poverty was a proactive and positive attitude, though it is difficult to know whether this assisted the move out of poverty, or resulted from the move out of poverty, or from some combination of these two factors. A characteristic of such people was their higher confidence levels, their strategic approach to their situation, and their supportive and tight family networks.

Remaining Out of Poverty or Falling Back into Poverty

Once they had begun their move out of poverty, some people were able to continue on this path and to remain out of poverty. Their circumstances were such that they had amassed savings, were able to earn a good income and/or had sound income-earning assets. This meant that they were able to meet their social obligations and these were not such a financial drain on them. Likewise, their businesses had been built up sufficiently to be self-sustaining and they were better able to withstand external shocks. The buffers that they had built up, combined with continuing favourable personal circumstances, meant that they could not easily be pushed back into poverty.

However, there were other people who had made the initial move out of poverty, but were not able to sustain this path, and instead, found themselves falling back into poverty. Despite working cohesively as a family, having a positive attitude to their situation and using their resources strategically, they found that unexpected events at a vulnerable stage in their recovery could push them back into poverty and so erode the gains that they had made.

The events that could push them back into poverty were those identified previously as reasons for people becoming poor; in particular, a sudden change in their social obligations, or external events, such as natural or economic events. Those people on this path found that they were confronted by such events before they had time to build up their reserves and so be able to buffer themselves from these destabilising events.

Discussion and Conclusion

This study identified three groups of rural poor in Samoa, each of which had their own characteristics. The long-term poor fall into poverty and then hit a safety net. These people appear unable to emerge from poverty using their available resources, and so remain poor over time. At the opposite end of the spectrum is a less vulnerable group, or the transitory poor. Although they may fall into poverty, their ability to access their own and other resources are such that they are able to emerge from, and remain out of, poverty. Between these two groups lie the vulnerable poor. While they are able to marshal their resources to move out of poverty, they appear unable to sustain this improvement, and find themselves vulnerable to further shocks that can push them back into poverty.

The long-term poor are likely to face many or severe poverty-inducing events that keep them locked into poverty. Fractured family and social networks, fewer opportunities to build up family income through employment in Samoa or abroad, and being unable to get a job because of illness or isolation, can all impede their ability to build up their reserves. Likewise, lack of access to resources, such as land, labour or credit, poor access to markets, an environment that is unsupportive of small business, and physical and social isolation are all factors that can make it difficult to build up the necessary reserves that can help them to move out of poverty.

To improve the situation of this group of rural poor, communities and villages could provide greater social support and recognition of the isolation and powerlessness of their most vulnerable members. Providing a more enabling environment, greater support for small business, improved access to credit and markets, and giving their support to projects and initiatives that can provide employment, could also assist this group. Likewise, government could assist this group by providing a macroeconomic environment that is conducive to small business and encourages opportunities for employment. Access to good health and education could improve the prospects for this group, while better rural infrastructure could reduce their isolation and access to markets. Better targeted credit

provision and more equitable access to resources would also assist this group, and targeted pension support for the sick and elderly could reduce the burden on communities.

By contrast, the less vulnerable group, or the transitory poor, have strong social and family networks, which give them access to remittances and other family support, and seem to be able to get employment. They are able to access credit and markets and have adequate land and labour resources. They have good business skills and are more likely to face a more enabling environment for small business within their village. By thinking strategically about their situation, being able to access outside agencies, and being discerning about their social obligations, they are able to accumulate reserves that act as a springboard for moving, and staying, out of poverty. This group is more likely to have been pushed into poverty as a result of external events, and could best be assisted when they fall into poverty through disaster relief, and through insurance and access to credit once they begin the process of emerging from poverty.

The third group, which is the vulnerable poor, are initially able to emerge from poverty, but an event or events force them back into poverty and so their process of building up their resources and accumulating capital is disrupted. Their access to social and family networks is not quite as strong as the transitory poor, their employment prospects are not quite so good, and they may not have access to the same level of resources. As a result, it is more difficult for them to build buffers than it is for the transitory poor, which then makes them particularly vulnerable to demands posed by repeated social obligations as well as external shocks.

This group does not require the long-term support and measures to move out of poverty that might be necessary for the long-term poor. However, policies that can enhance employment opportunities and the viability of small businesses could assist them. For this particular group, reducing their social obligations at this vulnerable stage could assist them in their move out of poverty and allow them to build adequate reserves to buffer them against future poverty-inducing events.

In summary, this study showed that rural Samoan people became poor because of events related to personal circumstances, social obligations, and external shocks such as natural or economic events. However, once they became poor, safety nets stopped their situation from getting worse. On reaching these safety nets, some people remained poor long-term and were unable to improve their situation. For others, poverty was more transitory, and they were able to move out of poverty and remain out of poverty. Some rural poor proved to be more vulnerable, being able to move out of poverty temporarily, but subsequently becoming poor again. The study implies that measures by government designed to reduce poverty could be more effective if better targeted to the particular circumstances of the groups of rural poor. Likewise, a more focussed response by villages and communities could assist its more vulnerable and its poorest members to climb out of poverty or to improve their situation.

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