

Commission on Poverty (CoP)
Study on District-based Support for the Disadvantaged
Draft Report

Purpose

This paper invites Members to consider the findings and recommendations of the captioned study and the direction suggested by the CoP Task Force on District-based Approach for strengthening the district-based approach to prevent and alleviate poverty.

Background

2. In order to examine the good practices at the district level in preventing and alleviating poverty, and to consider ways to strengthen local capacities to tackle future challenges, the Commission has conducted a Study on District-based Support for the Disadvantaged. The Study has taken into account the experience of the three pilot districts, as well as poverty alleviation work carried out in other districts.

3. The draft Report was discussed at the meeting of the CoP Task Force of District-based Approach on 19 April. The draft Executive Summary of the Report is at *Annex A*.

Discussion on the Draft Report

4. Members of the Task Force have examined the existing practices in implementing and coordinating poverty alleviation work at the district level. It was noted that some 10 districts have set their objectives, directions and strategies for poverty alleviation work, and there were a variety of mechanisms in coordinating poverty issues at the district level. It was further noted that -

- (a) there seems to be no single ideal model which should be adopted by all districts to tackle poverty – districts have their own characteristics, strengths/weaknesses and local dynamics. It may not be appropriate to apply a “one-size-fits-all” model to direct how districts should plan and coordinate poverty alleviation work;

- (b) there are however essential steps that should be taken by districts in analysing and identifying local needs, mapping out directions, planning and implementing programmes, and evaluating effectiveness of poverty alleviation and prevention programmes. These are captured in a Checklist at Annex B.

Discussion on the Way Forward

At the district level

5. The Task Force considered that the Study provided a useful reference on the existing practices of districts in planning and implementing poverty alleviation work. The Task Force noted that the Study has deployed a concept of “community resilience”, that districts can mobilise local resources (including human, social, financial and environmental resources) to respond to local challenges collectively, and to enhance their capacities by drawing reference from other good practices.

6. In terms of district coordination, Members considered that it was important to have effective coordination at the district level in order to develop clear objectives and direction to tackle poverty issues, to communicate them to government departments and local stakeholders, so that resources could be deployed effectively in response to common challenges. Members also considered that it was necessary for districts to develop some district-wide indicators to facilitate assessing the effectiveness of district programmes.

7. In terms of the roles of different parties at the district level, while Members agreed that poverty issues could not be dealt with by one department or agency alone, they considered it necessary to have an agency to take up the coordinating role. In this regard, Members noted that both the District Officers (DOs) and the District Social Welfare Officers at present assumed important roles in coordinating issues relevant to poverty alleviation and the two departments should continue their close cooperation in the future. In view of the increasingly important role of DOs to enhance inter-departmental cooperation and cross-sector collaboration to address district matters including poverty alleviation work, Members suggested that the Government should provide additional resources and suitable support to DOs to perform their roles.

At the central level

8. Members agreed that strengthening the capacities of the district themselves to tackle poverty is but one aspect of the district-based approach. Policy commitment and additional support from the central government is very important.

9. In this regard, Members considered that there were issues which could not be dealt with simply through inter-departmental efforts at the district level and require attention from the central level. In order to enhance effectiveness of district efforts, there should be an institutional structure for districts to escalate problems which cannot be dealt with at the district level to the Government so that policy barriers could be removed in a timely manner.

10. In addition, Members considered that while individual districts would set their own priorities in poverty alleviation work, the Government should consider taking a proactive approach in sharing broad directional objectives of poverty alleviation with districts from time to time, such as promoting reaching out to the “hidden” ones who are needy but not served by existing services, and promoting the development of social enterprises etc.

Way Forward

11. Members are invited to consider the Study and the recommendations therein, as well as the discussions of the Task Force. Subject to Members’ views, the Study will be released to the District Councils for reference.

Commission Secretariat

April 2007

“From Poverty Alleviation to Community Resilience” Study on District-based Support for the Disadvantaged

Executive Summary

Background

This study, initiated by the Commission on Poverty (CoP), aims to collect information on good practices in implementing and co-ordinating poverty alleviation work at district level so as to facilitate CoP in exploring ways to effectively reinforce the district-based approach to alleviating poverty. The two-phase study adopts a qualitative and quantitative approach. The qualitative study was conducted in three pilot districts, namely Sham Shui Po, Yuen Long and Kwun Tong in June and July 2006. The main target groups were local policy makers and service providers. A total of 7 government officers, 17 District Council (DC) members and 24 representatives from non-governmental organisations (NGOs) were interviewed in 8 focus groups.

The data collected in the first phase of the study provided a basis to develop the questionnaires used in the second phase, which was conducted from September to December 2006. The sample targets in the second phase covered a broader spectrum of stakeholders, including local government officers (viz. officers from HAD, SWD, EMB, etc.), DC members, school principals and representatives from NGOs. A total of 614 sets of valid questionnaires were collected and analysed. To ensure the accuracy and reliability of the observations made and the findings of the analysis, a verification process in form of a Report Back Session involving a total of 63 representatives from various government departments, DCs, Area Committees (ACs), schools, the business community and NGOs was held on 10 February 2007. The Report Back Session has not only helped establish the factual nature of the views collected but also confirmed that the observations flagged in this Report had represented general phenomena in the districts.

“From Welfare to Self-reliance” – The Concept

Poverty is often identified as a social problem that needs to be tackled by developing some appropriate approaches. This study does not adopt the problem-based approach. Instead, it applies the “community resilience” concept. Community resilience refers to the employment of community efforts to jointly identify the community’s needs and challenges, the mobilisation of community resources (including human, social, financial and environmental resources) to respond to these challenges effectively, and the enhancement of

the community's functions to face up to future challenges. Therefore, this study does not focus on the evaluation of individual projects or the effectiveness of the approaches to tackling poverty. Instead, it focuses on collecting information on good practices of implementation and co-ordination of poverty alleviation work at district level for reference by various districts in implementing future district-based work in alleviating poverty.

District Poverty Alleviation Work – An Overview of the Existing Practices

There is no specific mode for district poverty alleviation work. Currently, each district designs and plans its own strategy for alleviating poverty and related activities according to its community characteristics. Following a documentary review of the poverty alleviation work in the 18 districts, interviews with the policy makers and service providers in the three pilot districts, as well as sharing of views of various districts on and their experience in district poverty alleviation work, we have summed up the poverty alleviation work carried out by various districts in the district-based approach as follows:

- **Understanding of “poverty alleviation”:** The three pilot districts agree that poverty alleviation work should not simply be “giving away money”. The right direction for the work should be promotion of self-reliance. Besides, the work should not be limited to efforts on the welfare front. It should cover a wider area encompassing education, employment, housing, people's livelihood, etc.
- **Planning:** The survey reveals that 10 districts have set their objectives, directions and strategies for district poverty alleviation work. The work in various districts mostly focus on inter-generational poverty, self-reliance and harmonious community. Each district adopts different methods to set its service priorities, including holding discussions in the DC, drawing on the experience in past successful practices and holding district round-table meetings. In setting directions for district work, the districts will first try to understand the needs of the local poor people. The most common methods they adopt are making reference to district data, conducting surveys on district needs and collecting the views of local stakeholders. While clear directions have been set for poverty alleviation in some districts, there are some local stakeholders and service providers who are not clear about such directions, and as a result, the delivery of related services at district level cannot fully align with district directions and strategies for alleviating poverty.
- **Implementation:** The “service-oriented” approach is often adopted in district-based poverty alleviation work. According to this approach, local organisations, NGOs,

government departments and schools organise various kinds of services relating to poverty alleviation in the districts in the light of the needs of the local poor people. Services are in the form of cash/material assistance, employment services, tailor-made activities for the poor, temporary services implemented on a trial basis to achieve the effect of policy advocacy, existing services repackaged as poverty alleviation activities, etc. As local initiatives are wide-ranging, the respondents are of the view that some services are very similar (both in forms and types). While the funding for poverty alleviation activities comes from DCs, government departments and members of the local business community, other resources in the districts are explored, which is achieved by fully utilising the services of volunteers, tapping the strengths of the poor, drawing in resources (including those of the better-off residents in nearby estates) from outside the districts, promoting the participation of the industrial and business sectors, etc. As regards the allocation of resources, the districts tend to subsidise activities that are cost-effective in the long term and are not one-off in nature. At the same time, applicants seeking funding are encouraged to submit pilot projects fostering cross-sector co-operation. Some applicant organisations also consider that the existing application procedures can be simplified further.

- **Participation:** Local stakeholders are taking an active role in organising activities to alleviate poverty. They also take the initiative to participate in district meetings and seminars on poverty alleviation and actively express their opinions in such forums. The study reveals that currently a total of 13 districts have established mechanisms relating to poverty alleviation. The formations of mechanisms are made in light of local characteristics, service needs, district structure and geographical factors. In general, there are 1 to 4 such mechanisms in a district. The number of participants in each committee ranges from 6 to 300. These mechanisms serve a number of functions, which include providing a forum for discussing the directions and strategies for poverty alleviation in the districts, consulting the views of local stakeholders on poverty alleviation, allocating district resources and planning poverty alleviation services. While the mechanisms are established in light of the characteristics of each district, some local stakeholders think that there are overlaps in these mechanisms.

Six Major Factors Contributing to Community Resilience

Ability to cope with adversity: Summing up the successful experience of the poverty alleviation work in the three pilot districts and the analysis of the quantitative study, we find that the following three fundamental factors are important to a district in coping with adversity:

- **Factor 1 – Clear Directions:** Local poverty alleviation work is an on-going effort that needs continuous strengthening. Poverty cannot be improved by just implementing a few services. In carrying out district-based poverty alleviation work, therefore, clear directions and strategies need to be developed, and made widely known to local leaders, service providers and government officials.
- **Factor 2 – People-oriented:** Local poverty alleviation work should focus on responding to the genuine needs of the disadvantaged in the districts. The top priority is therefore to develop an effective system and approach to collect community data and assess the needs of the disadvantaged.
- **Factor 3 – District Participation:** The implementation of local poverty alleviation work requires joint commitment of the community; the work cannot be done by the Government alone. Therefore, there is a need to provide a platform at district level to allow the stakeholders (including the business community) to participate in the discussions, develop local poverty alleviation directions and strategies and organise relevant programmes.

Enhancing the functions of the community: The three factors mentioned above are the basis for implementing poverty alleviation work in the districts. For further enhancing the functions of the community to meet future challenges, the following three factors are indispensable:

- **Factor 1 – Link Directions with Actions:** In formulating district poverty alleviation directions and strategies, it is necessary to ensure that the service programmes and the criteria for allocation of local resources align with these directions and strategies.
- **Factor 2 – Address the Community Needs:** In understanding the needs of the disadvantaged in the districts, we should give special attention to those people/families having little contact with the community, in particular the disadvantaged groups/families not receiving CSSA.
- **Factor 3 – Co-ordinate the District Mechanisms:** In providing different platforms for community participation in the districts, it is also necessary to co-ordinate the functions of these mechanisms and ensure their efficiency.

Proposed Steps for Implementing the District-based Approach to Alleviating Poverty

The implementation of the district-based approach to alleviating poverty involves four major steps, namely identifying needs, mapping out directions, planning and implementing services, and evaluating effectiveness. This study will draw up a checklist for the district-based approach to alleviating poverty based on the current experience and good practices of poverty alleviation in various districts, so that policy makers, local leaders, the business community and service providers can make reference to it when examining, planning and implementing poverty alleviation work at district level. The checklist will set out the four major steps and ten focus areas of the district-based approach to alleviating poverty:

<p>Step 1: Identifying Needs</p> <p><i>To carry out a comprehensive diagnosis process and to gain a better understanding of the local need.</i></p>
<p><i>Focus Area 1 – Analyse community data:</i> A systematic method has been put in place in districts to collect community data. Apart from focusing on the collection of community data, the districts should collate such data, the survey findings on community needs and the views of local stakeholders and carry out detailed and multi-dimensional qualitative and quantitative analysis to evaluate the district poverty situation and identify its main cause. This will enable the community to have a better understanding of the problem and map out a more effective strategy for poverty alleviation.</p>
<p>Step 2: Mapping out Directions</p> <p><i>To develop directions and strategies to support the disadvantaged, to align action plan and budget with district strategic plan, and to review the role and functions of district co-ordination mechanism(s)</i></p>
<p><i>Focus Area 2 – Provide platforms for community participation:</i> To ensure that poverty alleviation services can be implemented effectively, community organisations and business sectors should be given opportunities to participate in resource utilisation and district planning matters. In the course of formulating directions and strategies for district poverty alleviation work, round-table meetings and seminars can be held to enable local stakeholders to have in-depth discussions on the needs of the disadvantaged and make recommendations. Consideration could also be given for presenting the directions and district strategies to local stakeholders and service providers through such platforms so that</p>

they can interface with each other in organising activities.

Focus Area 3 – Review the operation of existing mechanisms: District co-ordination mechanisms vary in nature and operation. District-based approach is not intended to compel all the districts to follow one particular structure but to reduce duplication of these platforms. Districts should review the functions of the existing mechanisms so that local stakeholders will not mix up meetings with similar functions and overlapping of similar mechanisms can be avoided. Districts should also identify the mechanisms that can promote poverty alleviation work most effectively.

Focus Area 4 – Enhance district co-ordination: Poverty cannot be dealt with by one department or agency alone. Further co-ordination among departments and service providers are needed to ensure that the local poverty alleviation work can be implemented effectively and efficiently. Moreover, we need to clearly define the roles of District Officer (HAD) and District Social Welfare Officer (SWD) in undertaking local poverty work.

Focus Area 5 – Link the district directions with action plans: Setting directions and strategies enables policy makers and community members to have clear and definite directions for local poverty alleviation. Apart from attaching importance to developing local directions and strategies, we must ensure that in allocating funds and organising activities, all the activities are aligned with the local directions and strategies set, so that these activities can effectively address the needs of the disadvantaged groups and thereby directly benefiting them. Therefore, in determining the criteria of fund allocation, policy makers must be well aware of the local directions, while service providers should have a clear picture of local poverty alleviation approach before planning activities in accordance with the local directions and strategies.

Step 3: Service Planning

To meet the needs of the disadvantaged and to reach the unreachable group.

Focus Area 6 – Reach the unreachable group: To understand and contact the disadvantaged in the community, we can examine the feasibility of setting up dedicated teams in poor districts. We can also consider launching community-wide home visit campaign annually, with a view to strengthening the contacts with the poor families living in public housing estates and private buildings.

Focus Area 7 – Organize targeted services: Apart from providing basic and regular

services, local organizations may address the specific needs of the poor by implementing pilot projects or organizing services through cross-sector co-operation. Such activities may include elements that facilitate local economic development, create employment opportunities, and explore the strengths and potential skills of the disadvantaged.

Focus Area 8 – Review the mode of resource allocation: Within the legitimate structures of funding bodies, policy makers can review the mode of funding allocation. For example, at the beginning of a DC term, the council may work out a long-term plan to complement district poverty alleviation work. This plan can serve as a frame of reference for members to allocate the district fund on a yearly basis. In addition, DCs can plan their yearly budget earlier so as to leave more time for service implementation. This will ensure more efficient use of community information.

Focus Area 9 – Simplify the process of resource allocation: Concern in the district is not so much the amount of funds allocated for organizing poverty alleviation activities as the possibility of excessive restrictions on service providers using the funds, which may have a negative effect on the promotion of innovative services. To further encourage service providers to make efficient use of resources in the district, DC and other funding bodies may consider reviewing the regulations for using public funds with a view to enhancing the flexibility of resource allocation, bearing in mind the need to ensure prudent use of public funds.

Step 4: Assessing Effectiveness

To ensure the poverty alleviation work reaches the desired results and to review the district directions and work strategies.

Focus Area 10 – Review performance regularly: While clear performance indicators are already in place for individual district service plans, such indicators are only used for assessing the effectiveness of a single activity and cannot reflect the overall district performance. It is therefore necessary for districts to develop district-wide performance indicators based on the directions and strategies of poverty alleviation, and make regular assessments.

In a nutshell, the main purpose of this study is to collect information on the good practices adopted by various districts in promoting and co-coordinating poverty alleviation work. The study report has set out in detail the districts' experience in carrying out the work, including the 18 districts' objectives, directions and mechanisms in relation to poverty

alleviation (paragraphs 2.2 to 2.6 in Chapter 2) and the approaches of the three pilot districts (paragraphs 3.9 to 3.16 in Chapter 3). We believe such valuable experience can provide useful reference for the districts to implement poverty alleviation work.

In fact, the district poverty alleviation work covers a very wide area. At the district level, it is of primary importance to fully understand the needs of the poor and the causes of local poverty, and develop specific and clear poverty alleviation directions and strategies according to these needs. During the process, we need to ensure sufficient platforms for local stakeholders to participate in discussions and express their opinions. In planning poverty alleviation activities, service providers must work in conformity with the district poverty alleviation directions and strategies. In the course of implementing activities, the needs of the unreachable poor individuals and families must be taken into account. To ensure that the district poverty alleviation work can achieve the desired results, we need to develop district-wide poverty alleviation performance indicators based on district directions and make regular assessments. Of course, we cannot rely solely on district efforts to carry out the poverty alleviation work; the support and co-ordination of the central Government is also necessary. In fact, Government's participation is indispensable. Although the focus of this study is not on understanding the role of and co-ordination between the Government and districts in poverty alleviation work, the subject merits more in-depth discussion.

Checklist for Implementing the District-based Approach

