The use of 'typical families' to explore livelihoods and service provision in urban informal settlements, South Africa

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Lucy Stevens and Sue Case

Introduction

The South African NGO Community Agency for Social Enquiry (CASE) specialises in large-scale developmental, policy-related research. In 1997, CASE was commissioned by the Gauteng Department of Housing to monitor the broad impact of some of its housing subsidy projects over four years, and to make policy recommendations for improving delivery of the scheme. In May 2000, participatory methodologies were used in four urban informal settlements to investigate some of these issues.

There were three main objectives of this phase of research. The first was to test the use of some participatory tools in an urban setting, building on earlier work reported for example in RRA Notes Vol. 21 (1994). Two other objectives relate to the outcomes we hoped for from the research. These were: to gain a greater understanding of livelihoods and sources of vulnerability within these poor but diverse urban communities; and to gain a more in-depth understanding of how service provision had changed the lives of individuals and affected household and community relations in sometimes unexpected ways. Here we report in particular on the use of a tool to discuss 'typical families', which focused on understanding households, intra-household relations and wider social networks, and formed the basis for discussions of the impact of service delivery.

The wider research project

The South African government's housing subsidy scheme allows beneficiaries access to a R16 000 grant. This can be paid to individuals, but most commonly, as in the four case study communities chosen for this research, the subsidy is 'project-linked' and managed on a community-wide basis. It is made available in three parts providing a) security of tenure, with residents receiving the title deeds to their stand b) essential services and c) a small house, usually two-roomed.

CASE has been monitoring the impact of the subsidy scheme in four case study communities since late 1997. These are located in different parts of Gauteng Province. Two of the settlements, Johandeo and Soshanguve South Extension 4, were green-field sites, and two, Eatonside and Albertina Sisulu, were existing informal

settlements being upgraded. By May 2000, progress had been made with the first two elements of the scheme in all four communities. In Albertina, the final phase was underway, and houses had been completed for about half the households.

The project has used a variety of research methods, including a panel survey of 50 respondents in each community, repeated every 9-10 months; and monthly feed-back from two community members ('site monitors') in each settlement who write daily diaries about local issues. To build on this, it was felt that it would be appropriate to conduct an in-depth investigation of people's livelihood strategies, and the impact of service provision on them, using participatory methods.

Focus groups held in May 2000

A series of focus groups was arranged in May 2000 during which three participatory tools were used. First, the groups discussed 'typical families' in their communities, which we explain in more detail below. These 'families' formed the basis for discussions throughout the focus group. Second, 'before' and 'after' pictures were used to provoke discussion about the delivery and impact of services. Third, a ranking exercise was carried out using a series of simple line-drawing pictures showing different items that households might spend money on.

All three tools were developed in conjunction with Professor Peter Delius at the University of the Witwatersrand, and Ilse Wilson at the NGO Mvula Trust. Both have used the 'typical families' tool in rural contexts, in particular to investigate issues about sanitation, water provision and payment. The tool has also been used in discussions of HIV/AIDS and to discuss issues of sexuality with adolescents. Ilse Wilson ran a workshop at CASE to introduce the methods to researchers and to train the two people who facilitated the groups.

Participants were recruited for the focus groups by community members who were already involved in the research through acting as 'site monitors'. Nine people were recruited per group, with the groups divided on the basis of age, sex and whether the person was employed or unemployed. Three groups were run in each community, making a total of twelve.
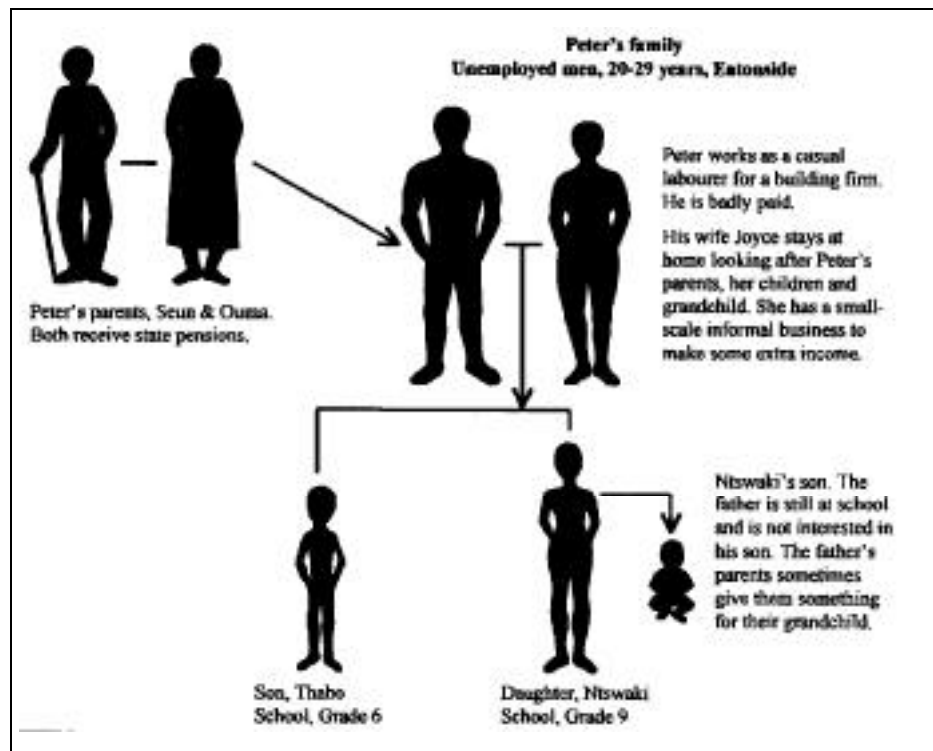
The 'typical families' tool

The 'typical families' tool has been presented in a previous paper in PLA Notes (Breslin and Delius 1997), and in the South African Participatory Poverty Assessment (May 1998), where it was reported that "to the best of our knowledge, this 'tool' is unique." (May 1998: Annex 2, XI). Since those early uses, the tool has continued to be adapted and improved. In our research, participants were given sets of silhouettes depicting a range of possible household members. The focus group was split into two sub-groups of four or five people, and each sub-group was asked to pick out a set of figures to represent a 'typical' family or household in their community. The groups were encouraged to invest emotionally

in their family, giving it a family name, discussing how its members are related, and what each of them does. They discussed problems facing particular members of the household, and how the people relate to each other and their neighbours. Each sub-group reported back to the rest of the group about their 'typical family' and the other participants asked questions about it.

With 12 focus groups, 24 'typical families' were created. These varied widely, ranging from simply a mother and father with their three children, to highly complex sets of relationships involving four generations and as many as fifteen people. The families usually revolved round a central couple, although in three cases the central figure was a single mother, and in one case the mother was absent most of the time, living at her work as a domestic servant and only returning once a month. The central figure(s) always had their children living with them. Additional figures were often the husband's parents (present in 17 families), but interestingly never the mother's parents. Teenage pregnancy was widely reported, with nine families including babies who had been born to the teenage children of the central figure(s).

Livelihoods, households and social networks

Participants in the groups discussed the lives and livelihoods of their 'typical families'. A range of factors emerged often pointing to the characteristics of vulnerability and poverty which are particularly urban in nature.[1] Security of employment and the presence or not of regular wages were key factors. Having access to a variety of sources of income also made some families less

vulnerable than others. This was often related to the number of adults and pensioners in the household. Many of the 'typical families' relied heavily on the government pensions of older household members which provided a stable if meagre income. The importance of these factors can be illustrated using examples of three 'typical families', ranging from the secure, 'respectable' Gumede family, to the very poor Mbali family.

The Gumede family are relatively well off, with the income from two pensions and Mr and Mrs Gumede's fairly secure employment. They have been able to send their eldest son to study at University, and could take in the twin sons of their second son. Only 3 of the 24 families included anyone with a secure job.

Peter's family are less well off. Peter has irregular work as a labourer with a building contractor. His wife does not have a secure job, but makes a little extra money from an informal business. They are helped by the pensions of Peter's parents. Their finances were further stretched to support their daughter's child whilst she finishes school. In other similar families, the wife worked as a domestic servant, often only one or two days a week. Other women made money doing washing for families in the community, and some grew vegetables to help feed their family or to sell.

The Mbali family is the least well off. They do not live with their parents, so have no access to pension money. They support their five children from Mr Mbali's infrequent work. Participants commented that "their main worry is

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[1]Factors include greater commoditisation, different environmental hazards and greater social fragmentation. See for example Moser (1998) and Mitlin and Thompson (1994).

food. The children do not eat healthily." The group did not specify what kinds of work Mr Mbali could find. In some families, the husband would do occasional gardening work. One or two scavenged for tins which they could sell for recycling.

Participants also discussed intra-household relations. While the household can be a source of security because members can be involved in a range of income-generating activities, it can also be a source of acute vulnerability. A range of social problems, which put the families under great strain, were discussed in the focus groups. Teenage pregnancy featured in 9 of the 24 families, and in another two families, older women were looking after children they had given birth to as teenagers. Usually babies live with their mother and her family. People in the focus group commented that it was unusual for the Gumede family to have taken in their son's children. Another common social problem was alcohol abuse by the father, mentioned in 7 of the families. This was often linked with unemployment. One group explained that

"When Dad was still working, life was very much all right. Communication was healthy at all times. But pressure has come to this Dad. He was retrenched and he doesn't have an income to support his family for the next ten years, so he is stressed and as a result he is drinking liquor with the aim of relieving his stress… Because of his stress his children are no longer performing well at school. When he comes back drunk, he always abuses his wife, and this affects the children."
(Working men, 25-40 years, Johandeo).

Wider social networks can be a valuable resource for poor families, but poverty has caused some families to become more isolated from these networks. Participants discussed the ways in which their 'typical families' related to their neighbours. Families like the Gumedes or Peter's family were described as having a 'good relationship' with their neighbours. One participant described the reciprocal relationships in this way:

"Their relationship with their neighbours is not that bad because they are people who are able to live nicely with their neighbours. If they don't have something they are able to ask from their neighbours, and even their neighbours are able to ask something from them. They are living as a family." (Eatonside, working women, 25-40 years, 20/05/2000).

Even many of the poorer families described good relationships with their neighbours. As one group recognised, this was because many families are in the same position.

"They live well with their neighbours because their neighbours are just like them…
They treat each other well but they all face similar problems. And sometimes they cannot help each other because you find that whatever the one neighbour doesn't have, the other neighbour also doesn't have." (Eatonside, unemployed men, 20-29 years, 26/05/2000).

For some, though, poverty was putting a strain on their relationships, and they were beginning to feel excluded. In one family, the grandmother was ostracised because people saw her picking through rubbish. She was also very old, but not yet sick. As a result they suspected her of practising witchcraft. In other cases, neighbours were beginning to lose patience with always being asked for help.

"The family lives well with its neighbours. It is a very poor family and the neighbours are always there to help when asked for assistance. However, people are not the same. Some other neighbours become annoyed by the continued assistance they are expected to give." (Johandeo, unemployed women, 20-29 years, 24/05/2000).
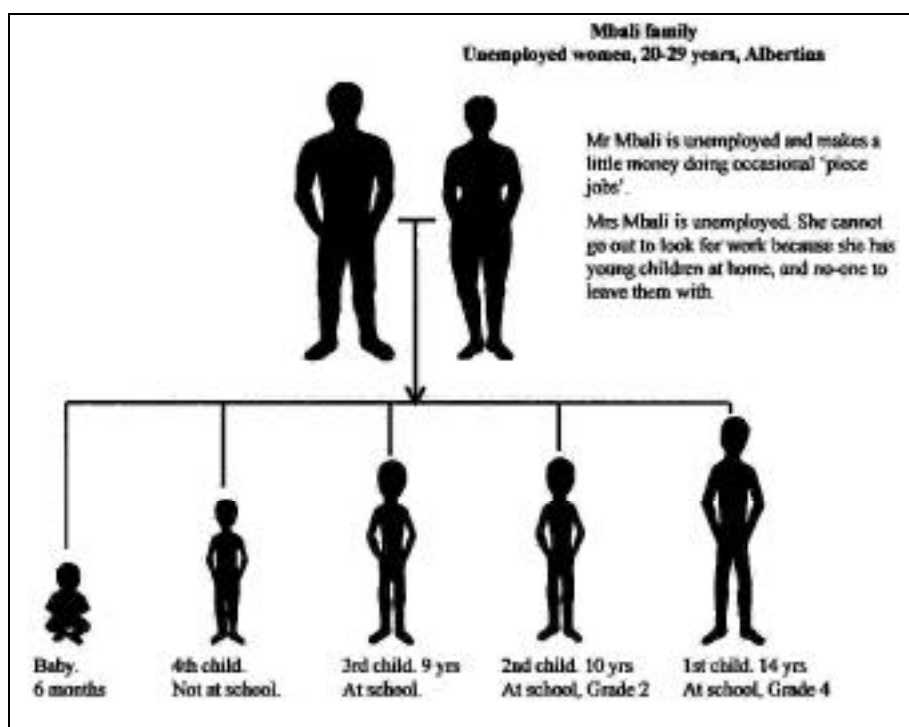
Reflections on the process

One aim of the research was to test the use of some participatory tools in an urban setting. Here we reflect on the use of the methods, concentrating on two concerns

Mbali family
Unemployed women, 20-29 years, Albertina

Mr Mbali is unemployed and makes a little money doing occasional 'piece jobs'.

Mrs Mbali is unemployed. She cannot go out to look for work because she has young children at home, and no-one to leave them with.

Baby. 6 months

4th child. Not at school.

3rd child. 9 yrs At school.

2nd child. 10 yrs At school, Grade 2

1st child. 14 yrs At school, Grade 4

raised by other researchers at CASE before the groups: one about the group dynamic, and the other about results.

First, concerns were raised about whether participants would engage with the participatory exercises we hoped to use. Some thought that urban people might think themselves too sophisticated to play with pictures, and were concerned that the exercises would be thought patronising. In rural settings where fieldworkers have conducted these kinds of exercises in the open, with people able to join and leave the group as they wish, they found that men often lose interest. We were also concerned that the exercises might not develop fully because the facilitators were used to having a much greater role to play in directing focus groups based simply on discussion.

These concerns were not borne out in the experience of the groups. Men contributed as willingly as women did. The only people who did not seem completely at ease with the process were the groups of pensioners. They seemed more aware and cautious of the role of the facilitator, and less able to relax in unfamiliar surroundings, so it took longer before they began to talk freely. In the other groups, the participants appeared to accept the exercises easily. Debate flowed well, requiring little interjection from the facilitator. Groups began to question each other, taking control of the discussion and allowing the facilitator to step back. People's attention was focused on the pictures and the exercise, not on each other or the facilitator. Sensitive issues such as domestic violence and alcohol abuse were frequently raised, almost as often in men's groups as in women's groups, which suggests that people felt free to talk about their own realities in a truthful, but depersonalised way.

A second set of concerns was about the kinds of results the groups would generate, and in particular whether they would be relevant to the impact of the subsidy scheme. It seemed there was a fear of handing over control of the discussion to the group participants. However, there were two main ways in which the tools generated valuable information. First, precisely because participants could take control of the discussion, they were able to raise issues of particular concern to them. For example, in groups from one site, participants continuously returned to the question of crime and inadequate policing. In another, debate focused on the lack of access to schools close by. Participants also chose to focus on particular elements of the services that had been provided by the subsidy scheme. In one community, residents had been extremely disappointed with the quality of the tarred access road that had been built. In another, there was concern about the costs being charged for installing electricity meters.

Second, the initial discussion of 'typical' families added to our understanding of the nature of poverty in these settlements and the broader problems facing their residents. It provided a fuller context in which to assess the impact of the services installed as part of the housing subsidy scheme. For example, it highlighted the range of social and economic problems facing these communities, some of which were beyond the scope of the subsidy scheme, or even of wider government intervention, to solve. This highlighted the importance of co-ordination between different government departments, and between government and NGOs in upgrading efforts. The 'typical families' tool also encouraged participants to talk broadly about the impacts of the subsidy scheme. For example, as well as focusing on the material benefits of the scheme, people talked about issues of dignity, and the importance to them of the sense of pride developments had brought to their communities.

Lucy Stevens is a graduate research student at the School of Geography, Oxford University. Address: Jesus College, Oxford, OX1 3DW. Email: lucy.stevens@geog.ox.ac.uk.

Sue Marshall. Community Agency for Social Enquiry, PO Box 32882, Braamfontein, Johannesburg, South Africa, 2017. Email: SUE@case.org.za.

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