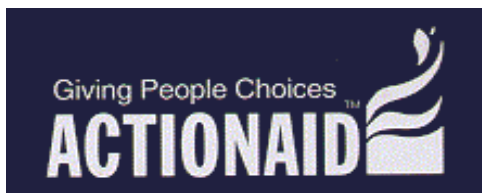


**The Basic
Necessities Survey:**
*The Experience of
ActionAid Vietnam*



**Rick Davies and
William Smith**

*Hanoi, Vietnam
September, 1998*

Established in 1972, ActionAid is one of the UK's largest development charities. It works with over two million people in the developing world, helping them achieve lasting improvements in the quality of their lives.

ActionAid is secular and non-political. It works with the poorest people, regardless of religion, race or political persuasion.

ActionAid works with poor communities in 24 countries in Asia, Africa and Latin America. Through long-term development projects set up in close consultation with local people, it aims to reduce poverty and bring about lasting changes in people's lives.

ActionAid has been working in Vietnam since 1989. At present ActionAid Vietnam is involved in designing, implementing (in partnership with local authorities), facilitating and funding anti-poverty programmes in Sơn La, Hà Tĩnh, Quang Ninh and Lai Châu Provinces.

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The Basic Necessities Survey: the experience of ActionAid Vietnam

by Rick Davies and William Smith

Abstract

This paper reports on the use of a new method for the measurement of poverty, based on an adaptation of a survey based approach used in Britain in the 1980's. The method has a number of advantages. It is open to a broad definition of poverty and sensitive to changing definitions of poverty over time. The process is participative but produces quantifiable results. The analysis of data collected does not require highly specialised statistical skill. The results can be publicly presented in a way that is easily understood.

The paper has three sections. Part 1 describes the use of the method by ActionAid Vietnam in late 1997. This includes an account of the project context, the rationale for the use of the method, an explanation of the method itself, and an initial analysis of the results. Part 2 briefly documents and comments on some peer responses to the method, by participants in a recent meeting of the Development Studies "NGOs and Poverty" study group. Part 3 places the method in the context of recent related research. Other variations of the method used in Europe in the 1980's and 1990's are referred to, as well as some of the criticisms that have been made of this type of method. Finally, in Part 4 the method is reviewed in the light of some criteria of appropriate methods of poverty measurement, as proposed in a workshop by the ODI in 1997.

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1. The Use of Basic Necessities Surveys by ActionAid Vietnam.

1.1 ActionAid Vietnam's programmes

ActionAid is an international non-government organisation that has been working in Vietnam since 1989. It currently funds two long term rural development programmes with clear poverty alleviation objectives. The first development area was established in 1992 in Sơn La province (north west highlands). Work in a second development area was launched in 1995 in Hòa Bình province (north-central coastal strip). These provinces lie in the two poorest regions of Vietnam. ActionAid interventions in Vietnam have, to date, focused primarily on agriculture, financial services and health. Its programmes are implemented by local government partners and mass organisations. In addition to its work in long term development areas, ActionAid has also promoted the replication of its Sơn La financial services scheme in two provinces of northern Vietnam.

Within Hòa Bình province ActionAid works in the Trại Sơn zone of Can Lộc district. This is an upland area of the district, made up of 7 communes. The population of the zone is approximately 40,000. Households are dependent primarily on paddy rice production, though livestock rearing and firewood collecting constitute other important income generating activities. Farmers face a range of problems including infertile soil, harsh climatic conditions, poor infrastructure, lack of capital and limited access to market opportunities. Lying on the route of the Hà Chí Minh trail, the area was heavily bombed during the Vietnam war.

ActionAid Vietnam's interventions include

- upgrading of irrigation canals and irrigation management systems
- integrated pest management
- agricultural extension
- veterinary services
- development of savings clubs
- water source protection
- health education

An important element of ActionAid's programme in Hòa Bình has been the use of wealth ranking exercises to identify the poorest households in all villages where the programme is implemented. Because of the difficulty of doing complete household wealth ranking exercises in large villages, a simplified method has been used. Respondents categorise households in their village as 'poor', 'middle' or 'rich'. The results of a set of interviews within the village are collated and each household in the village categorised as 'poorer', 'middle' or 'richer' on the basis of these results. A number of programme interventions, including savings and credit and health, have been focused only on the 'poorer' households, which constitute from 25-30% of households in each village.

1.2 ActionAid Vietnam's monitoring and evaluation system

ActionAid Vietnam's programme in Hòa Bình is divided into three sectors: savings and credit, agriculture and health. Within each sector, a clear objective has been defined, along with activities planned to achieve this objective. To measure completion of activities and achievement of objectives, a set of output and outcome indicators are measured annually. The savings and credit sector is given as an example below.

<i>Objective</i>	<i>Outcome indicators:</i>
"To help poor households build up their own capital through the formation of independent savings groups with simple, convenient and easily applicable financial service mechanisms appropriate to the poor. Once this has been achieved, to facilitate poor households' access to external financial services".	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • average savings balance per member • average inflow of money into each savings group • independence of groups
<i>Activities:</i>	<i>Output indicators</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • village wealth ranking • establishment of savings groups training group leaders • supplementary lending • facilitating access to external financial services 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • no. of villages wealth ranked • total no. of savings groups • total no. of members

For the programme as a whole, however, the following aim has been defined:

"To stabilise and improve the socio-economic conditions of an identified group of poor households, enabling them to take control of key aspects of their lives and use this experience to demonstrate effective poverty alleviation strategies to local authorities"

To measure achievement of this aim, three tools are used:

a. Group Based Assessment of Change

This method seeks to solicit beneficiary views of whether their socio-economic conditions have improved or deteriorated over a one year period. Members of a sample of savings and credit groups are asked about changes that have occurred to other members of their group over the previous year. As well as asking whose condition has changed, they are also asked how and why the socio-economic conditions of their fellow members have changed. The responses are then analysed to assess the extent to which the reasons given for improvement can be attributed to AAV interventions and the extent to which reasons for deterioration in conditions may demonstrate the failure of AAV interventions.

b. The Basic Necessities Survey

The Basic Necessities Survey is the subject of this report and is discussed in detail in subsequent sections. By monitoring poor households' access to certain assets and attributes (as well as changing perceptions of the importance of these assets and attributes), the survey results provide a more objective cross-reference to beneficiary views on socio-economic change solicited through the 'group based assessment of change' method described above.

c. Partner Views

Can Léc District People's Committee conducts an annual survey of wealth and poverty in all 31 communes of the district. The survey is based on such indicators as average income, infrastructure development, literacy, school attendance etc. Communes are ranked from richest to poorest on the basis of survey results. The annual 'performance' of communes where AAV has been operating, in comparison with other communes in the district, is monitored and used as a starting point for discussion with partners on why socio-economic conditions in these communes have improved or deteriorated.

1.3 The Basic Necessities Survey

1.3.1 The Methodology

The basic necessity survey methodology is based on an approach used in the early and late 1980's in Britain by Mack and Lansley (1985) (Frayman, 1991), with some adaptations. It was introduced to ActionAid Vietnam by Rick Davies - a social development consultant who was asked to assist AAV with a strategy for programme monitoring and evaluation. According to the survey, poverty is defined as "*a lack of basic necessities*". Unlike many approaches to poverty assessment, there is no a priori definition of a basic necessity. The definition is generated through the survey process itself.

The starting point of the survey is a list of *items* (e.g. blanket, radio, pesticide pump) and *events* (doctor visits house when family members are sick, three meals of rice per day) etc. which people may or may not believe to be basic necessities. It is important that the list should contain some items which most people would agree are basic necessities and others where there may be wider disagreement. The list is in effect a menu.

A representative sample of respondents are then asked two questions:

1. "*Which of the items on this list do you think are basic necessities which everyone should have and which no one should have to do without ?*"
2. "*Which of these items does your household have now ?*"

For each item, the percentage of respondents who believe the item to be a basic necessity is calculated. For the purposes of the survey, only items which at least 50% of respondents consider to be basic necessities are considered as such. This could be called a majority, democratic or common sense definition. The percentage of respondents who consider each item to be a basic necessity is then considered as the weighting for that item. A poverty score can then be calculated for each respondent by adding together the weighting for all the items which the respondent actually possesses, divided by the total of the weightings for all the items (the total possible score). If the respondent has all the '*basic necessities*', their score will be 100%: if they have none of the '*basic necessities*', their score will be 0%.

1.3.2 The pre-test

ActionAid's field staff in Hù Tĩnh discussed a possible list of items which could be utilised in the survey. Following training in the survey methodology, this list was then used by staff in a field test. The test was conducted with 23 respondents in 2 villages. These respondents were selected at random from AAV's wealth ranking lists for the two villages. Of the 23 respondents, 5 were categorised as '*richer*', 12 as '*middle*' and 6 as '*poorer*' according to these lists. The field test led to a number of changes to the list of items.

In particular, it became clear that some items needed to be made more specific:

Toilet became stone built toilet
Blanket became thick cotton blanket
Money to pay for common medicines..... became doctor visits the house when sick

Secondly, the original list contained too few items that a majority of respondents felt were not basic necessities (only two). A number of items were therefore added that it was felt fewer people would conceive to be necessities: motorbike; watch; wooden, two compartment cupboard etc.

Though in most cases, careful explanation of the questions was required, the field testing confirmed that the two questions posed were clear and understandable to respondents. The central issue is how respondents understood the idea of 'basic necessities'. It is questionable whether the concept carries as much connotation of 'rights' to certain necessities for Vietnamese respondents as it may have done with those who have participated in similar surveys conducted in the west. Staff conducting the exercise felt that respondents understood the concept in more practical terms. This was not considered problematic and it was decided to make no changes in questioning techniques.

1.3.3 Implementation

The survey was conducted by 5 field staff (4 female, 1 male) over a period from August to October 1997 in three communes where ActionAid's programme is implemented. Interviews were conducted in all 31 villages in these three communes. It was decided to interview a sample of 10% of all households. In addition, households were sampled in proportion to the numbers found in the categories of 'poorer', 'middle' and 'richer', identified earlier by the simplified wealth ranking exercise mentioned above. In practice, a total of 420 interviews were conducted. Of these, 267 were conducted primarily with women and 153 primarily with men, though in many of the interviews both husband and wife were present and participating in the exercise.

<i>Commune</i>	<i>No. of HHs in commune</i>	<i>No. of HHs interviewed</i>	<i>Sample size (% of all HHs)</i>	<i>'Poorer' HH's interviewed</i>	<i>'Middle' HH's interviewed</i>	<i>'Richer' HH's interviewed</i>
Mũ Léc	1386	152	11.0%	40	77	35
Nh ^o n Léc	1340	132	9.8%	36	60	36
Th-î ng Léc	1291	136	10.5%	41	56	39
All	4017	420	10.5%	117	193	110

In all cases, respondents were interviewed as representatives of their household, rather than as individuals. Each interview took approximately one to one and a half hours. This includes the time taken to introduce and explain the questions to be asked. After careful explanation, most respondents found the questions relatively easy to answer. ActionAid will repeat the survey in five years time, where possible with the same households that were interviewed in 1997.

1.3.4 Uses of the survey results

1. The raw survey data can be used to illustrate current perceptions of necessity (see section 1.4.1). When repeated in five years time, it will also demonstrate the extent to which perceptions of necessity have changed over time. Standards of what are believed to be basic necessities are likely to change over time if a society is undergoing some form of economic development or cultural change.
2. The raw data of the survey can be used simply to show the extent of households' access to various items and attributes and the extent of disparity in such access (see section 1.4.2).
3. Following calculation of poverty scores, the results of the survey can also be used to illustrate the distribution of poverty, socially and geographically (see sections 1.4.3 and 1.4.4). Again, when repeated in five years time, the results can show changes in the distribution of poverty.

4. The results can be used to verify the accuracy of ActionAid's wealth ranking categorisations (see section 1.4.5). Do the BNS results demonstrate that 'poorer' wealth ranking category households have lower poverty ratings than other households?

5. Over time, the results may shed light on the impact of ActionAid's programme activities on particular groups of beneficiaries (see section 1.4.6). The average poverty ratings of 'poorer' savings and credit group members can be compared with an equivalent group of non-members both now and again in five years time. Likewise, the average poverty ratings of villages with irrigation programmes and without irrigation programmes can be compared now and in five years time.

1.4 Results of the 1997 Basic Necessities Survey

1.4.1 Perceptions of necessity

The table below shows the extent to which respondents believed the various items and attributes on the list to be basic necessities of life. Only those items which more than 50% of respondents believed to be basic necessities are considered as such for purposes of analysis. The results of the survey showed that respondents perceived all but 6 of the 26 items and attributes as basic necessities.

<i>Item</i>	<i>No. of respondents who consider this item a basic necessity</i>	<i>% of respondents who consider this item a basic necessity</i>
Doctor visiting the house when sick	418	99.5%
All children studying up to level 2	418	99.5%
1 μ ¹ of land per person	418	99.5%
Buffalo or cow	415	98.8%
3 meals a day	414	98.6%
Thick blanket	413	98.3%
Wooden rice chest	412	98.1%
Concrete rice drying yard	412	98.1%
Well with well head	411	97.9%
Bicycle	410	97.6%
Electric light	408	97.1%
Pesticide pump	399	95.0%
Livestock vaccination	391	93.1%
A new set of clothes each year	388	92.4%
Toilet - built of stone	386	91.9%
Electric fan	350	83.3%
Meat once a week	336	80.0%
Access to VBA loans	325	77.4%
Stone built house	322	76.7%
Bathroom	312	74.3%
Table and chairs made of good wood	188	44.8%
Watch	175	41.7%
Radio	135	32.1%
TV	88	21.0%
Two compartment wooden wardrobe	78	18.6%
Motorbike	32	7.6%

¹ 500 m²

1.4.2 Access to items and attributes

The following table shows the percentage of respondents who have or are able to access the various items and attributes in the list. The results are disaggregated by household categories derived from ActionAid Vietnam's earlier wealth ranking lists of 'poorer', 'middle' and 'richer' households. The table is arranged according to the proportion of *all* respondents which have access to each item, in descending order. The scale of differences in households' access to these necessities is given in the right hand column.

<i>Item</i>	<i>All</i>	<i>'Poorer'</i>	<i>'Middle'</i>	<i>'Richer'</i>	<i>Max. Difference</i>
1 sjo of land per person	93%	94%	92%	95%	3%
Electric light	93%	81%	97%	97%	16%
Bicycle	91%	76%	96%	99%	23%
Concrete rice drying yard	90%	73%	96%	98%	25%
Wooden rice chest	87%	69%	94%	95%	26%
3 meals a day	85%	68%	89%	97%	29%
Buffalo or cow	83%	69%	90%	85%	21%
All children studying up to level 2	79%	70%	76%	92%	22%
Well with well head	77%	74%	71%	92%	18%
Stone built house	76%	42%	84%	97%	55%
Thick cotton blanket	74%	50%	76%	95%	45%
Doctor visiting the house when sick	72%	58%	75%	80%	22%
Electric fan	67%	36%	72%	94%	58%
A new set of clothes each year	66%	44%	67%	88%	44%
Livestock vaccination	61%	44%	66%	70%	26%
Meat once a week	47%	15%	46%	85%	70%
Pesticide pump	47%	15%	50%	75%	60%
Watch	43%	13%	39%	82%	69%
Access to VBA loans	41%	42%	45%	33%	9%
Radio	34%	21%	30%	57%	36%
Toilet - built of stone	32%	3%	29%	69%	66%
Table and chairs made of good wood	28%	3%	24%	60%	57%
Two compartment wooden wardrobe	21%	3%	12%	55%	52%
TV	19%	2%	17%	41%	39%
Bathroom	16%	2%	9%	43%	41%
Motorbike	6%	0%	0%	24%	24%

As might be expected, previously defined 'richer' households enjoy greatest access and 'poorer' households least access to all but three items or attributes. One exception was the 'well with well head': 74% of poorer households have wells with well heads, compared with only 71% of middle households. This is explained by the fact that ActionAid Vietnam provided support exclusively to poorer households in two of the three communes surveyed to build concrete heads for their household wells in 1996 and 1997. Such support was not extended to the 'middle' category of households. The other two exceptions were 'buffalo or cow' where fewer richer households had access than middle households, and '1 sjo of paddy land', to which a higher proportion of poorer households have access than middle households. The reason for the apparent low inequality in land distribution is the equitable system of agricultural land allocation implemented on a per capita basis under the 1993 Land Law.

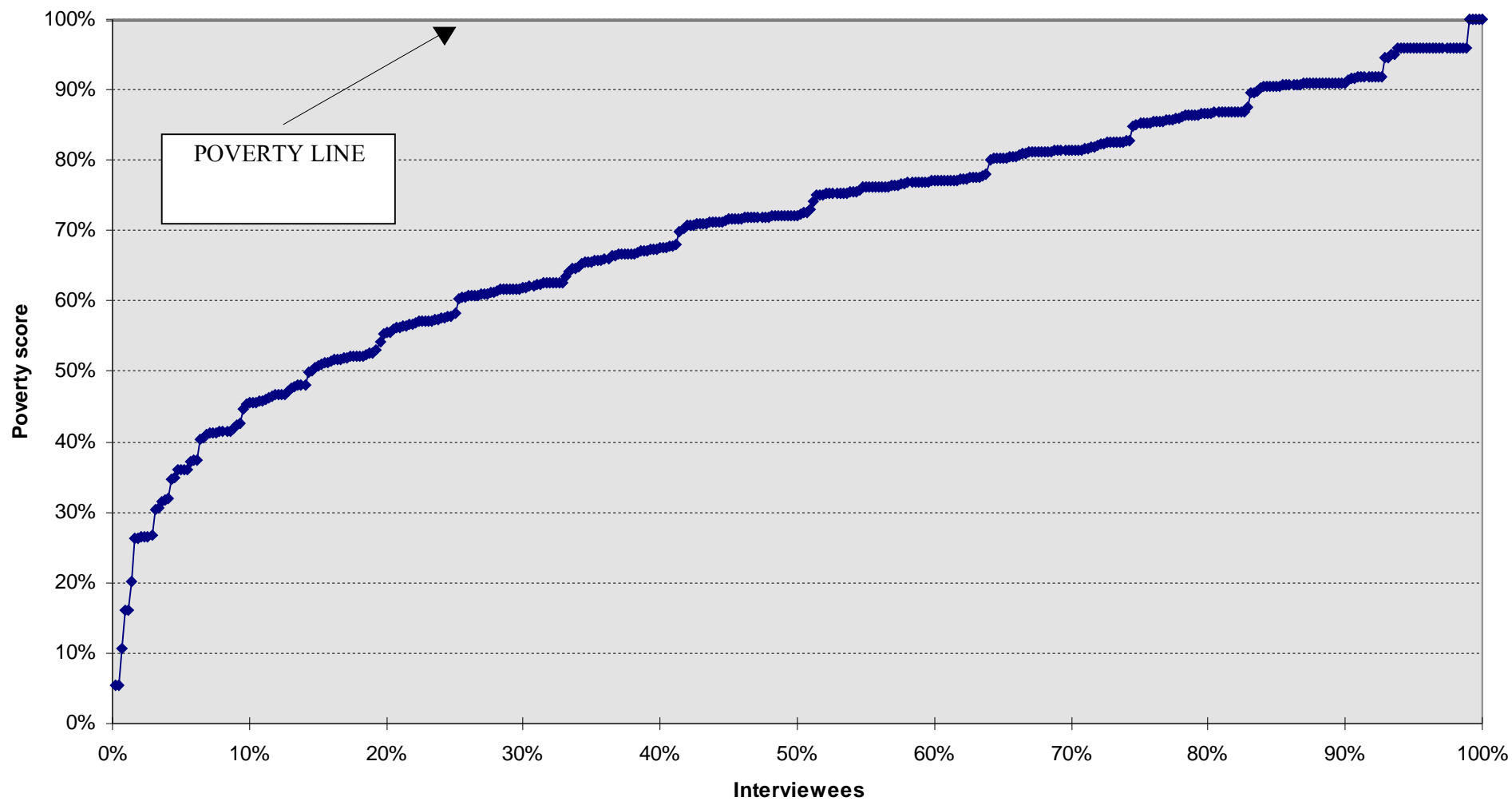
There were eight items where the disparity in access between the 3 groups was greater than 50%. Of these, items which are both publicly visible and widely viewed as basic necessities (e.g. pesticide pump), would be useful ad hoc indicators of relative wealth.

1.4.3 Poverty scores - the distribution of poverty

The graph overleaf shows the overall distribution of poverty within the three communes. According to the survey results, only 5 respondents (1.2%) have access to all the items which are considered basic necessities (i.e. poverty rating of 100%). However, very few households can be considered to be destitute, that is, lacking all basic necessities. As shown below, almost half of the respondents scored a poverty rating of 75% to 100%. The gradual distribution of poverty ratings and the very low percentage of households not lacking any necessities seems problematic when we try to think in conventional terms of a "poverty line", clearly distinguishing poor people from others. This issue will be returned to in Part 3 below. From ActionAid's point of view, it does not weaken the value of the method as means of tracking changes in poverty over time.

<i>Households with poverty ratings below:</i>	<i>No. of households</i>	<i>% of total</i>
75%	215	51.2%
50%	59	14.0%
25%	5	1.2%

BNS survey 1997: spread of poverty scores
Mü Léc, Nh©n Léc, Th - ñng Léc communes



1.4.4 Poverty scores - geographical distribution

The table below shows the average poverty scores of respondents in each village in which the survey was conducted. The villages are ranked from highest to lowest average poverty score. It appears that relatively wide disparity exists between different villages, but there is a less notable difference between communes. ActionAid's experience elsewhere in Vietnam, in S-n La province, suggests that differences in wealth between villages can be greater than those between households.

<i>Mù Léc commune</i>	<i>Average Poverty score</i>	<i>Nhôn Léc commune</i>	<i>Average Poverty score</i>	<i>Th-âng Léc commune</i>	<i>Average Poverty score</i>
Thị X, 2	76%	Village 3	83%	Tôn Tiên	83%
S« Hµnh	73%	Village 6	81%	Trµ S-n	77%
Nhét Tôn	71%	Village 2	80%	Mù Sµi	76%
S-n Thñy	71%	Village 1	78%	Thµnh Mù	76%
Tr'i Tiúu	65%	Village 9	73%	S«ng Phong	75%
Thị X, 1	59%	Village 10	73%	Nam Phong	74%
S'i Sång	54%	Village 5	70%	S«ng Thµnh	72%
		Village 4	69%	Phó Thã	69%
		Village 8	69%	Tôn B-nh	69%
		Village 7	65%	Vĩnh Phúc	67%
		Village 11	64%	Vĩnh X,	64%
				Xuôn Mai	60%
				CÇu S-n	54%
Average	68%		73%		70%

1.4.5 Poverty scores - distribution by social group

The table below shows the average poverty scores of respondents according to AAV's earlier wealth ranking categories. Overall, the results of the Basic Necessities Survey confirm the validity of AAV's wealth ranking results. In all three communes, respondents categorised as poorer in the wealth rankings have a much lower average poverty score, while respondents categorised as richer in the wealth rankings score higher.

	<i>Mù Léc commune</i>	<i>Nhôn Léc commune</i>	<i>Th-âng Léc commune</i>
"Richer"	84%	86%	84%
"Middle"	68%	75%	76%
"Poorer"	51%	58%	50%

1.4.6 Poverty scores - use as an indicator of programme impact

The table below shows average poverty ratings of savings and credit group members in 1997 for the three communes. They were selected as potential members on the basis of village level household wealth ranking exercises. In five years time, the poverty ratings of these respondents will be compared with those of non-members who had the same poverty scores as the members in 1997, to see if there is any attributable difference in the socio-economic conditions of beneficiaries and non-beneficiaries.

<i>Savings and Credit Group members 1997</i>		
<i>Commune</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>No. of respondents</i>
Mü Léc	52%	39
Nhôn Léc	59%	28
Th-î ng Léc	51%	35
All	53%	102

2. Peer Responses to ActionAid Vietnam's use of the Basic Necessities Survey

An outline of the method and a summary of the results of the BNS were presented at a meeting of the UK Development Studies "NGOs and Poverty" Study Group in late July 1998². This was attended by UK NGO representatives, university staff and students, and consultants. Some of the queries and concerns raised following the presentation were documented by the participants. These have been quoted below, along with our responses.

- *How much does all this cost?*

A simple but useful question. Some poverty assessments can be very expensive, in terms of staff numbers, skills required, days of work involved and the time required from respondents. It would be useful to make a comparison with the World Bank Living Standards Surveys, and the World Bank's more recent use of Participatory Poverty Assessments (all adjusted to a common scale of application).

The costs of the BNS survey conducted by AAV in Hù Tùnh are estimated as follows:

	®ång	US\$
Staff time: 420 interviews x 1.5 hours x 4166 ®ång	2,624,580	188.71
Staff travel (petrol): 105 trips x 50 km x 135 ®ång	708,750	50.96
Gift for interviewee ³ : 420 households x 3000 ®ång	1,260,000	90.60
Photocopying forms: 600 @ 200 ®ång	120,000	8.63
Computer input and analysis: 10 days x 120 US\$		1,200.00
Total		1,538.89
Average cost per interviewee		3.66

- *To what extent was the basic necessity listing influenced by seasonal household priorities?*

In agricultural communities, such as the villages of Hù Tùnh province, needs and resources may vary substantially between seasons. ActionAid Vietnam's view is that there are some items on the list which are likely to be seasonally variable in their importance e.g. the need for a thick blanket. This potential bias will be kept in mind when ActionAid Vietnam considers the use of the method in other locations. The other related source of potential "bias" is the fact that overall scarcity of income may be greater at some times of the year compared to others, and this may influence responses. Ideally, 'before' and 'after' surveys should be carried out at the same time of the year, to counter-act the influences of any short term seasonal effects on judgements.

² Attended by 15 members: 9 NGO representatives, 4 University staff and students, 2 consultants.

³ AAV does not pay people to take part in interviews for research or monitoring and evaluation purposes. However, it is recognised that the time spent by participants can sometimes constitute a burden. For this reason, it was suggested that interviewers bring small packets of sweets or biscuits to eat during the interview or to give to the family's children.

- *Was the prioritisation of basic needs influenced/differentiated by gender at a household level ? Asking men and women will not only generate different perceptions of what is absolutely necessary, but also of what a given household has. Gender differentiating does imply more time and resources but reveals much which is vital and useful far beyond the limits of this study.*

Overall, approximately 64% of the respondents were female. This proportion varied between 60% in Nh^on Léc commune and 66% in Mù Léc commune.

It is quite possible that asking men and women within the same household will reveal some differences in views of necessities and what a household has (see section 3.3 below)

- *Why put `asset necessities` (which are tied to particular livelihoods) into the same menu as consumption necessities (implied) ? Could collect both but analyse/summarise separately.*

In a very mixed economy, putting particular income producing assets into the menu may be a problem: they may be necessities for those in that business, but not for others. However, in the areas surveyed by ActionAid Vietnam, there was one main source of livelihood: rice cultivation. This may not always be so: the rural economy may diversify as it expands and more care may need to be taken about including such livelihood specific assets.

The suggestion (made in the second half of the question above) to include both assets and consumption items on the menu and then analyse them separately later on is sensible. It allows respondents more room to decide what is important independent of the concerns of researchers. This is important because, in people's minds, many items do not necessarily fit into one of two neat boxes (asset vs. consumption). Cows/buffalo may produce milk but also be used as draught animals, and simply signify status. In Bangladesh, iron sheeting on a house may provide good shelter from rain, but constitute a disposable assets during hard times.

- *It would be useful to classify what we actually mean by basic necessities. The menu that you showed seems to be more an index of capabilities*

The term `basic necessities' is defined as a category but its local meaning is a matter for the respondents. It would defeat the purpose of this approach to specify in advance the specific contents which should and should not be seen as real examples of basic necessities.

- *In any case, it would be useful to relate your weights with those of the UNDP poverty index.*

We think an intermediate step would be needed before this was a meaningful exercise. Weightings for items could be identified through a national survey within Vietnam, then related to the contents of international indices. Differences here could have consequences, whereas differences between international and sub-national locations would probably be expected.

- [Do you need] *basic necessities to be out of poverty ? ...Because most people in Chiapas (Mexico) would see having all these as beyond the wildest dreams of avarice. Their `basic necessities` would be way below these.*

Basic necessities will always have to be defined locally. There is no question of applying Vietnamese standards to Mexico. However, what is interesting about this comment is the fact that the person concerned felt able to make a comparison between standards evident in central Vietnam, and those she is familiar with in Chiapas. The BNS results were easy enough to read, and allow such a comparison.

"What about spiritual/religious/creative items ?"

There is only one constraint on the type of items that can be placed on the menu of possible necessities: the need for a range of different observers to agree that this item is present in a particular setting. If they cannot, then we will not know if different interview responses reflect different real conditions, or simply differences in views of the item being observed. There may be some reliably observable expressions of *`the spiritual / religious / creative`*.

"How to avoid not missing the less visible means of support e.g. remittances, migrant earnings for part of family, pensions, links to richer patrons, relatives etc. ?"

The only limitation is the ability of the survey designers to describe these in a way that can be recognised without difficulty by the respondents. But we then have to ask, what difference does the addition of such items make to the results obtained ? Does it alter judgements of the depth and distribution of poverty, and which households are poor ? This question is returned to below.

3. Previous Research Using the Same Approach.

The design of the ActionAid BNS is based on earlier attempts to define poverty through the use of public opinion surveys. The first is the work of Mack and Lansley in Britain in the early 1980's (Mack and Lansley, 1985). Their 1983 national survey was replicated in 1991 (Gosschalk and Frayman, 1991). The second is the work of Bjorn Hallerod in Sweden in 1992 (Hallerod, 1994).

In his 1994 paper Hallerod has summarised what he sees as the main weaknesses of the method as used in Britain. Hallerod's main points are presented below, with a commentary which indicates how they were addressed in the design of the BNS.

3.1 The nature of the menu

"...it was Mack and Lansley who made the initial selection of those items which might be regarded as necessities. The respondents did decide which items from the list were necessary but they did not decide the range of items from which they could choose." (Hallerod, 1994:3).

This apparently purist criticism raises a useful question of how to tell if Mack and Lansley's (or anyone else's) choice of a set of items to go on the menu had any significant effect. It could be argued that if the choice available in the menu was too limited, this would be evident in the lack of variation in the percentage of respondents viewing an item as a basic necessity. In Mack and Lansley's 1983 survey, the percentage ranges from 14% to 97%, with 25% of items not being seen as necessities (by 50% or more of respondents). In ActionAid Vietnam's menu, the percentages ranged from 7.6% to 99.5%, with 23% of items not being seen as necessities (by 50% or more of respondents).

Hallerod made no comment about the *number* of items on the UK menus as distinct from how the items were *identified* in the first place. On the one hand, the bigger the menu, the less chance there will be of the overall poverty score being sensitive to the presence/absence of particular items. On the other hand, the larger the list of possible basic necessities, the bigger the chance that a household may be missing any one particular item. The percentage of households with *some* degree of poverty is therefore likely to be increased (a "head count" measure). These possible consequences can be investigated by re-calculating poverty scores for existing surveyed groups, using original and truncated menus.

This was done with the Hư Tlinh survey data. Two additional menus were created. One (Menu B) by removing the five items with the lowest weightings (percentage of people seeing them as necessities); the other (Menu C) by removing five items on a random basis. The percentage of households with no degree of poverty at all (poverty scores of 0%) were as follows: Menu A - 1.2%, Menu B - 2.4%, and Menu C - 6.4%. In both cases, the reduction in menu size therefore led to a lower percentage of 'poor' households as defined by the survey's poverty line.

When the overall poverty scores were generated by the two new menus, and then compared to those from the original menu, there was a high degree of agreement in both cases. (Menu A+B = 0.99 correlation, Menu A+C = 0.99 correlation). These results suggest that, as a measure of the distribution of poverty, the BNS method is quite robust: poverty scores are not vulnerable to small changes in the composition of the menu.

Sensitivity to the specific contents of the menu is also obviously important when considering comparisons across locations. If the survey is undertaken in two different locations one after the other, the latter can include, wherever feasible, the items used in the former, plus others

that are known to be locally relevant. Scores can then be calculated for the second location on the basis of two sets of menu items: one with those items specific to the first location, and the other also including those items found in the second location. Hallerod's Swedish surveys included a number of items also used in Mack and Lansley's surveys. Some of those items and the percentages of people seeing them as necessities were as follows:

<i>Some of the items posed as basic necessities:</i>	<i>Percentage of respondents agreeing:</i>		
	UK 1990	Sweden 1992	Difference
Telephone	56.0	95.8	39.2
Car	26.0	46.7	20.7
Washing machine	73.0	92.8	19.2
TV	58.0	70.0	12.0
New, not second hand clothes	65.0	73.8	8.8
Insurance (household)	95.7	88.0	7.7
A holiday away from home for one week a year, not with relatives	54.0	54.4	0.4

3.2 A consensus approach ?

"Interpretation of the term `consensus` is a second arbitrary aspect of Mack and Lansley's approach... They decided that an item was a necessity if more than 50 per cent of the population perceived it as such." Hallerod argues that while *"It can be seen as reasonable to let the majority to decide what is necessary"* there is no theoretical reason why the level should be 50%. We argue back that while it is clearly a misnomer to call the Mack and Lansley's work a consensus approach, Hallerod's objection to 50% seems unreasonable. It is likely that a consensus of the population would agree on a 50% cut-off point because this a common and familiar means of democratic decision making. This democratic based rationale for the choice of 50% is consistent with the public opinion basis of the method. Fifty per cent plus 1 also literally represents what is a "common sense" judgement. It is a democratic definition of poverty.

3.3 Variations in beliefs within a society

Hallerod argues that `Difficulties arise...when an individual's preferences diverge from the aggregated preferences revealed by public opinion....a person whose preferences are close to the average is less likely to be assessed as poor than a person whose preferences deviate from the average."

Hallerod's solution is to calculate a revised set of item weightings, based on the public opinion of a demographically defined group that more closely resembles the individual who has been surveyed. But a person's reference group may not be best or easily defined in demographic terms. There may, in fact, be as many best-fitting reference groups as there are respondents. Ultimately, this approach leads towards a method which would measure a persons own view of necessities *for themselves*, as well their view of what are necessities for others at large (as at present). There is nothing inherently wrong with this method so long as it is remembered that poverty is both a personal and a social experience. We assess our well being in terms of own standards, but we are also exposed to the judgements (and consequences) of others, including the public at large. A method that uses the opinion of the public at large seems quite reasonable as a first approximation of the extent and nature of

poverty. The complications caused by individual's divergence from public opinion can be dealt with, where and when those differences are felt likely to have some consequence.

Hallerod stresses the likely differences in preferences that could be found between young and old people, citing likely differences in views on the relative importance of stereo equipment. However, when Mack and Lansley's data on different age groups' preferences is examined, it is the similarities that stand out. There is a 0.84 correlation between the views of the 15-24 age group and those of the 65+ age group. There was also a remarkable level of agreement between people of different political views, different social class, and family structure. The average correlation in views between pensioners, single parent families with children, two parent families with children, couples without children, and single people, was 0.84. All correlations were statistically significant at the 0.01 level. Surprisingly, despite all these comparisons, Mack and Lansley did not present any data on the views of men versus women. In Hallerod's 1992 survey, it appears that there were significant differences in views between men and women on approximately 20% of the items on the menu. For example: dishwasher, balcony or garden, a best outfit for a special occasion, a modern dwelling, private pension insurance, not having second hand clothes, saving 50 SEK per month).

It is possible that in other cultures, especially those with less pervasive mass media, there would be much less homogeneity of public opinion about basic necessities than has been found in the European surveys. In those circumstances, it may be important to pay more attention to possible differences in views between different types of respondents. This is especially the case where survey data is being used for programme planning or adaptation purposes.

This is not the case with the ActionAid Vietnam BNS survey data. It's sole use is as a means of assessing longer term aggregate change in households' standard of living. However, trends over time and their association with gender or economic class will be analysable. So too will be the correlation of these changes with the scale of participation by different groups in the development activities assisted by ActionAid Vietnam

Weighting of items

Hallerod also points out that "*To divide consumption dichotomously into necessary and non-necessary items also means that a person who does not consume items that 51% of the population regards as necessities is seen as being just as poor as the person who does not consume items that 95% of the population regards as necessary.*" This problem has been solved by the BNS, and by Hallerod himself, simply by weighting each item in importance according to the % of respondents who saw that item as a necessity. However, the BNS then calculates a poverty score on the basis of those items viewed as necessities by 50% or more of the population. In contrast, Hallerod constructs a proportional deprivation Index using all the items of the menu, weighted by the perceived significance. The significance of this choice will be returned to below.

Hallerod rightly questions how Mack and Lansley justified their definition of the poor, as not only those who lacked items that 50% or more thought were necessities, but more specifically, those who lacked three or more of such necessities. As he points out, there was no theoretical reason for this number. Even the lack of one necessity should, by definition, be seen as a form of poverty.

Poverty Lines ?

Hallerod questions the need for a poverty line at all, noting that "*...a poverty line tends to imply a precision that indicators of poverty cannot justifiably claim...*" The fault is not so much in the indicators or measurements, but in our expectations that the divide between the poor and others should be clearly dichotomous, and not a gradual transition. There is no reason to expect the former. The ActionAid data from Hù Tùnh shows a gradual trend from households having just the slightest degree of poverty, towards more extreme forms of total deprivation. The data available in Hallerod's report shows a similar trend of extensive marginal deprivation trailing off into much more limited but intensive deprivation. Mack and Lansley's focus on three or more items may well have been a pragmatic response to knowledge that the high incidence of poverty implied by a one item or more definition would not be publicly acceptable. Nevertheless, even this apparently generous "head count" measure does show some interesting cross-country variations. In Sweden, Hallerod found that 33% of respondents lacked one or more basic necessities. In UK in 1983, the figure was 43%. In Hù Tùnh in 1997, as indicated above, the figure was 98.8%

4. Expectations and conclusions

In October 1997, the Overseas Development Institute (ODI) and DFID jointly convened a meeting to discuss *"Indicators of Poverty: Operational Significance"*. Their invitation pointed out that *"we are struck by two apparently contradictory trends in discussion on poverty. One the one hand, international conferences are increasingly inclined to adopt global targets which are simple, quantitative, unambiguous; reduce poverty by half by 2015 is a good example, passed at the Social Summit in Copenhagen and incorporated in the DAC statement on Shaping the 21st Century. On the other hand, theoretical debate points increasingly to the complexity of the concept of "poverty", to the importance of issues like participation and social inclusion, and to the imperative of privileging local perceptions. Simple quantitative, unambiguous targets are important rallying -points and valuable markers of progress. But are they sufficient, and can they be used alone to help allocate resources?"* (Aidan Cox, 1997).

The BNS is able to recognise and value local perceptions. It is able to take a wide view of poverty, looking beyond incomes and assets, to include social experiences and events. The one main constraint is observer reliability. Some non-material aspects of people's standard of living may not be easily and reliably observed across respondents. What may be needed in these cases are exemplar events which can be associated with an abstract description of the proposed necessities.

The BNS does produce quantifiable results which can be compared over time, and across locations. An important constraint is the need for a set of common items on the menu being provided to respondents. The more distant the cultures, the more difficult this will be. There were many more items in common in the British and Swedish surveys, compared with the Hư Tĩnh survey.

BNS data could be used to set and to monitor targets. However, care will need to be taken to acknowledge the importance of changing standards over time. The Mack and Lansley surveys in 1983 and 1990 showed that while there was a net decrease in the percentage of people in Britain not possessing 31 different "necessities" there was a greater net increase in the percentage of people viewing all these items as necessities. Standards of living can go up, but expectations may increase even more, with the possible consequence of many people feeling worse off than they were previously.

The BNS has one other important feature implicit to varying degrees in both standards mentioned above. It is democratic. The items seen as necessities are open to choice, their selection and weighting is assigned democratically, "one person: one vote". It is the democratic nature of the process which may give the results generated by this form of measurement a degree of public acceptance and legitimacy not available to expert judgments. This in turn may enable such surveys to have more impact than that available through any further development of sophisticated means of measurement based on a priori theories and definitions of poverty.

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