



## Selecting a unit of analysis

Should analysis take place at the level of the individual, household, community, organization or a combination of these? Different aspects of poverty and deprivation are evident at different levels of social organization. For example, the lack of street-lighting or access to markets may apply predominantly at the level of the settlement or community while food security and income may apply to the household level, or even at an intra-household level due to differentiation based on age, gender or relationship to household head (Herbert and Shepherd, 2001).

Focus on a particular level of analysis may lead to important gaps in understanding. Assessment or analysis at different levels would also allow any inter-linkages between them to be explored (ibid.). Table 1 highlights the advantages and disadvantages of different units of assessment. Gosling and Edwards (1995) have a useful section in their book on recognizing and dealing with discrimination and difference, which for example suggests ways of working with children, women and minority ethnic groups.

**Table 1: Advantages and disadvantages of different units of analysis**

Unit of Analysis	Advantages	Disadvantages
<b>Individual</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Easily defined and identified</li> <li>Allows social relations to be explored</li> <li>Allows inter-household relations to be explored</li> <li>Can allow more personal and intimate issues to emerge</li> <li>Permits an exploration of how different people by virtue of their gender, age, social status etc. experience poverty/ the effects of the intervention.</li> <li>Permits understanding of political capital</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Most interventions have impacts beyond the individual level</li> <li>Difficulty of attribution through long impact chain</li> <li>Difficult to aggregate findings</li> </ul>
<b>Household</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Relatively easily identified and defined</li> <li>Permits appreciation of household coping and survival strategies such as income, asset, consumption and labour pooling</li> <li>Permits appreciation of link between individual, household and group/community</li> <li>Permits understanding of links between household life cycle and well-being.</li> <li>Permits understanding of political capital</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Exact membership sometimes difficult to assess</li> <li>The assumption that what is good for the household is good for all its members is often flawed.</li> </ul>

<b>Group/CBO</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Permits understanding of collective action and social capital</li> <li>• Permits understanding of political capital</li> <li>• Permits understanding of potential sustainability of impacts</li> <li>• Permits understanding of potential community level transformation</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Exact membership sometimes difficult to assess</li> <li>• Group dynamics often difficult to unravel and understand</li> <li>• Difficult to compare using quantitative data</li> </ul>
<b>Community/Village</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Permits understanding of differences within the community</li> <li>• Permits understanding of community level poverty and of changes in provision and access to produced capital such as water, electricity.</li> <li>• Permits understanding of collective action and social capital</li> <li>• Permits understanding of political capital</li> <li>• Permits understanding of relations between different groups/factions in the community e.g. clans.</li> <li>• Permits understanding of potential community level transformation and beyond</li> <li>• Can act as a sampling frame for individual/household assessments</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Exact boundary sometimes difficult to assess</li> <li>• Within community dynamics often difficult to understand</li> <li>• Difficult to compare</li> </ul>
<b>Local Development Agency</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Permits understanding of potential sustainability of impacts</li> <li>• Permits understanding of changes brought about by capacity building</li> <li>• Allows performance especially of effectiveness and efficiency to be assessed</li> <li>• Allows relationship with community, group and individual changes to be explored.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Within NGO dynamics often difficult to understand</li> <li>• Difficult to compare across local NGOs</li> </ul>
<b>Institutions</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Permits broader change and influence to be assessed</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Greater problems of attribution</li> <li>• Internal dynamics and processes difficult to explore or understand</li> </ul>

Source:

Herbert and Shepherd, 2001, adapted from Hulme, 1997 and Roche, 1999