Appendix D

Key Findings from Focus Group Discussions with Staff

As part of the evaluation, the Independent Evaluation Group (IEG) conducted six focus group discussions with Bank staff to gather insights on how the availability of poverty data affects the Bank’s poverty diagnostic and whether and how they translate into country strategies. The focus groups collected qualitative feedback based on the participants’ personal experiences and views. As such, the responses were treated as exploratory and were triangulated with other sources of data in the final report.

Focus groups brought together 22 staff members working on countries across all six Regions of the world. Participants were selected with the consideration of the balance between the types of countries by lending (i.e., International Bank for Reconstruction and Development, IBRD; International Development Association, IDA/blend), fragile and non-fragile countries, and availability of data. Given resource and time constraints, focus group discussions gathered staff working on 18 countries: Afghanistan, Botswana, Cambodia, Democratic Republic of Congo, India, Indonesia, Jordan, Kosovo, Kyrgyz Republic, Moldova, Pakistan, the Russia Federation, South Sudan, Sri Lanka, Papua New Guinea, West Bank and Gaza, and the Republic of Yemen as well as the Organization of Eastern Caribbean States.¹

The homogeneity of each focus group was in the type of work participants performed as their main duties. As such, each focus group distinguished between task team leads (TTLs) or co-leads of poverty assessments and poverty updates, country economists, and TTLs and co-TTLs of country partnership strategies. Invitations were extended to all identified types of staff in each of the above mentioned countries. In the cases where poverty assessments for the identified countries were produced prior to 2009, the country economists were invited to participate instead of the assessment TTLs. Not everyone who was invited to participate in the discussions was able to join. Every effort was made to accommodate the busy and varying schedules of the invitees to ensure their participation. The main questions raised in the discussions were the same across all the focus groups. The same facilitator led discussions in each focus group. Each focus group discussion was conducted for an hour and a half. When necessary, the facilitator asked for additional information and probed for emerging trends. The list of the main questions appears below. The discussions about the use and translation of poverty analytics and data in country strategies varied among groups. As such,
poverty assessment leaders and country economists did not respond to all of the questions regarding country strategies since they felt their experience in this field was relatively limited. Similarly, a few of the country partnership strategy (CPS) TTLs and co-TTLs were not comfortable responding to some of the questions related to data and poverty diagnostic.

Main Questions

DATA AVAILABILITY

- Do you think the Bank has sufficient poverty data to make policy advice related to poverty in client countries?
- What are the main constraints to obtaining poverty data in your line of work?

QUALITY AND CONSTRAINTS TO POVERTY DIAGNOSTIC WORK

- What are the main constraints that the World Bank faces when developing analytical work on poverty?

TRANSLATION OF POVERTY DATA AND DIAGNOSTIC INTO COUNTRY STRATEGIES

- What are the primary constraints to translating analytical work on poverty into the Bank’s country strategies?
- In your experience, what plays an important role in the design and focus of country assistance strategies (CASs) and CPSs?

FEEDBACK LOOPS

- How much does the Bank consult with external stakeholders while creating country strategies?
- What are the obstacles for an effective integration of stakeholder feedback, if any?

Perceptions on Availability of Poverty Data

Despite many data constraints, the participants do not consider the adequacy of data a main constraint to making policy advice, particularly when the economists and experts know the country context well. In general, all of the participants were in agreement that data availability and data quality vary by country and region. However, participants in the focus groups did not express strong feedback that, in the countries where there has been only one or no Household Income and Expenditure Survey (HIED) or Living Standard Measurement Survey (LSMS) between 2000 and 2012,

230
analytical work, providing policy advice, or creating country strategies when compared to countries with the greater number of surveys. The general explanation was that the Bank has sufficient data to make policy advice and uses its strong knowledge of country context to do its work even in the countries with limited data. Discussions further highlighted that in countries where there is no sufficient HIES or LSMS data, Bank staff become more opportunistic in using other sources of data and try to do quicker assessments on the ground.

The Bank needs to have long-term investments in data collection and analytical work, including building client country capacity. Most of the participants agreed that the Bank has a comparative advantage and client-country demand to do capacity building work. Capacity building work benefits the Bank in the long run because it ensures the systematic collection of higher quality data and greater supervision over data collection. The discussions also highlighted that in certain cases, the Bank engages in one-off deals to collect HIES data in low-income countries or uses limited engagement through trust funds for capacity building. Both strategies may not be sustainable if there is no long-term planning. Some participants also highlighted different types of challenges the Bank faces in countries while helping build capacity. According to the participants, in low-income countries and in the Sub-Saharan Africa Region, particularly, an influx of donors compete for governments’ attention and in some cases have competing agendas. In those situations the Bank could be a smaller player and may either duplicate efforts in building data capacity within the client governments or not be able to convince the governments that higher data collection capacity may have long-term positive impact. The discussants also highlighted that working on middle-income countries is also challenging because donors are not as willing to invest in these countries as they are in low-income countries and often the Bank can’t secure its own trust funds to do this work.

Discussions with country program coordinators pointed out that building data collection capacity of the client governments not only helps governments collect better data, but also ensures greater country ownership and consideration of country context.

In addition to capacity building work, poverty assessment leads and country economists pointed out that there is a need for additional budget and long-term investments in the data and diagnostic work. Participants highlighted the current tension between the Bank’s “belt-tightening” and staffing policies, and its need to produce more data and poverty analytics to better understand the root causes of poverty and to achieve the Bank’s new twin goals. Some of the participants highlighted that the Bank’s budget and organizational structure does not support
Appendix D
Key Findings from the Focus Group Discussions with Staff

having a cadre of well-trained staff who work continuously on data collection and data harmonization as well as retaining highly specialized poverty economists on open-ended contracts. In all of the discussions with country economists and poverty assessment leads, and in one of the focus groups with the CPS leads, staff highlighted that data-related work is mainly done by short-term consultants who work on an ad-hoc basis. Because of this, available data are not harmonized, and, often times, is not comparable for the purposes of proper analysis.

It is important to consider political economy around the collection and sharing of poverty data. In general, participants indicated that the Bank’s access to data in its client countries is improving. At the same time, the discussions highlighted a highly sensitive political nature of poverty data in the countries that participants have worked in. Based on this experience, the discussions also stressed the importance for the Bank to establish trustworthy and long-term relationships with client governments to collect the needed data. The CPS and CAS leads stressed the importance of building relationships with client governments as a building block for obtaining poverty-related data after they are collected.

Several discussion groups pointed to the Bank’s important role in making data available to all interested parties in the client countries. Some of the staff working on the fragile and conflict-affected countries noted that client governments share data with the Bank that have not been released publicly or shared with others. Thus, the Bank has a critical role to play in making such data transparent and available.

The Bank needs to make better use of other sources of data and consider changing its data sources to have a more comprehensive picture of its impact and engagements. Most of the country economists and poverty assessment leads, along with some CPS leads, mentioned that relying only on LSMS and HIES data is not sufficient to understand the impact of the Bank’s work on poverty, and the Bank needs to rethink its data needs and investments. Participants mentioned that there is a need for collection of data on the impact of Bank’s and other donors’ projects on poverty. Discussions highlighted that HIES and LSMS data are very useful in creating poverty profiles but are not dense and multidimensional as they focus only on income-based dimensions and do not cover the large number of issues important to poverty work. Collecting detailed and multidimensional data will help poverty specialists respond to specific questions from country directors and country management units (CMUs) on policy choices. For instance, some poverty assessment leads mentioned that they are being asked to add language on shared prosperity to all documents and strategies because it is the new trend in the Bank, but there is not enough data to do so.
The issue of relating and harmonizing various datasets reverberated through all of the discussions and was pointed out as an imperative going forward. As a few of the participants pointed out, including some of the CPS and CAS leads, the Bank needs to ensure that the “various datasets talk to each other.” Some participants highlighted that harmonization and centralization of data will require better collection and use of the project level data, and could accordingly shed light on the impact of the Bank’s interventions on the ground.

Additionally, one of the CPS leads groups and one of the poverty assessment leads groups highlighted the urgent need for the Bank to strengthen its data availability at the subnational level, where government capacity is usually weaker and data are much scarcer. The discussions highlighted that since the Bank aims to work on eliminating extreme poverty, it needs to better understand the underlying causes of poverty and the impact of its interventions at the subnational level.

Perceptions on the Quality of and Constraints to Analytical Work on Poverty

In general, the participants agreed that the Bank’s work on data quality and poverty analytics has significantly improved in the past 10 years, particularly since it created a centrally located team of poverty experts. Some of the discussions with CAS and CPS leads pointed out that multidimensional analysis of issues, including the use of both quantitative and qualitative tools, helped create better pictures of poverty in their countries. Furthermore, the Bank has created useful analytical tools, such as poverty maps, incidence analysis, and STATCAP that create more opportunities for working with governments on capacity building and data collection because these tools provide mutually beneficial services.

The overall feedback was that the quality of the analysis in poverty assessments is usually strong but often does not provide specific policy recommendations. The focus groups with the poverty assessment leads and country economists highlighted that poverty assessments are not designed to provide specific policy recommendations, but rather they serve as background information and analytical tools. Some of them pointed that poverty data currently collected by the Bank do not lend themselves for being used for policy recommendations in diagnostic work. Poverty assessment leads felt that they lack time and cross-sectoral collaboration to deliver comprehensive products.

Poverty diagnostic work needs better continuity through long term planning and budgeting. Poverty assessment leads and country economists mentioned that poverty diagnostic work deserves greater continuity. Currently incentives to be a poverty economist are not high because staff contracts have limited terms (two to
APPENDIX D
KEY FINDINGS FROM THE FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSIONS WITH STAFF

three years), and internal recognition of the work is insufficient. Thus, the Bank does not have enough well-trained staff with extensive backgrounds in poverty work. Furthermore, some of the poverty assessment, CAS, and CPS leads mentioned that poverty assessments and knowledge work heavily depend on the availability of trust funds, particularly in middle-income countries where governments are more selective about Bank engagement. This sentiment was broadly shared by the staff working on IBRD countries and countries with rich data.

As a positive example, poverty assessment leads and country economists noted the benefits of adopting a programmatic approach to poverty work more widely. In four groups with poverty assessment leads and country economists, participants underscored that more systematic poverty assessments and updates leading to the production of shorter and more regular notes have more potential of being used both by the clients and the country teams. For example, a large poverty assessment right before the CPS process starts may not have an impact on it as much as regular poverty updates submitted to the country team. The programmatic approach also allows TTLs to secure funds and to plan better for the dissemination of poverty work. The participants further highlighted that the dissemination of poverty work is usually neglected.

The Bank needs to create more opportunities and incentives for staff to disseminate the findings of poverty diagnostics. Participants pointed out that the Bank does not do enough to disseminate the findings of its poverty work internally and even more so in the client countries. Poverty assessment leads also pointed out that the Bank’s communications team (External and Corporate Relations) does not provide adequate support on how to best package messages from the poverty work based on the needs and interests of various stakeholders. Some of the recommendations from the focus group participants included building in time and sufficient budget into poverty analytical work for proper dissemination and collaboration with the government agencies, which may mean working closely on capacity development and communication with the Bank’s teams.

Additionally, the participants pointed out that there is more institutional recognition of and rewards for large poverty assessments than smaller updates and poverty notes, because the larger products tend to have a “big splash” in the media. However, it is not evident that larger studies have more impact. Thus, the Bank needs to reward staff for good work on smaller products that are tailored to country needs or for informal consultations with clients, where most of the learning may happen.
There is a need for better collaboration and coordination among World Bank networks and sectors. Poverty assessment leads highlighted that the engagement of sector specialists across networks and countries depends on personal connections rather than institutional policy and official staff terms of reference. As such, poverty assessment leads often use their personal connections with experts they know to provide inputs to chapters in their assessments. Some participants pointed out that the lack of collaboration between poverty teams and sector staff negatively impacts the results of the analysis and specificity of recommendations in poverty work. A positive example of cross-sectoral collaboration cited by some poverty assessment leads was Poverty and Social Impact Analysis, which according to the discussants, required formal coordination and involvement across sectors and thus had strong multisectoral analysis. Two of the focus group discussions with poverty assessment leads highlighted that it was easier to collaborate with the social protection teams than with the education and health teams.

Perceptions on How Poverty Data and Analytics Translate into Country Strategies

CMUs and country directors play a critical role in CAS and CPS design processes. There was a general agreement in all of the focus group discussions that CMUs and country directors, in particular, play an important role in CAS and CPS processes. Both CPS and poverty assessment leads mentioned that country directors’ preferences and past experiences have a great impact on the CPS, which could be both a positive learning experience and a drawback in cases when they don’t align with a specific country context. A division of opinions was observed between the two focus groups including CAS and CPS leads where one group believed that a country director’s experience and agenda play a critical role and can change the trajectory of country engagements whereas the other group believed that a country director can change the pace and leadership style rather than the strategy direction. One of the explanations could be the size of the client countries and Bank’s engagement as well as IBRD/blend countries versus IDA countries.

Poverty diagnostic is not consistently and comprehensively used in CAS and CPS. The discussions with the poverty assessment leads and country economists revealed a unanimous sentiment that typically only a small percentage of poverty work is used in country strategies. They added that usually the time and efforts spent to prepare the poverty works are not used efficiently as only a small percentage of their work is used in strategies. They mentioned that poverty experts are usually called on to provide either descriptive information or support a point with specific data that the CAS and CPS want to promote. A number of the discussants in the groups including poverty assessment leads and country economists highlighted that some issues are included in CAS and CPS because they may be current trends in the Bank.
and are merely used to “tick the box,” citing gender and shared prosperity as two examples. At the same time, some of the poverty assessment leads in various groups acknowledged that country teams may not be ignoring poverty diagnostic on purpose, but they omit poverty analysis because it is not the “same language” they are used to, which makes it harder for them to understand a more nuanced approach to poverty.

The discussions with the CAS and CPS leads confirmed that they view poverty diagnostics as key to creating poverty profiles but not to providing concrete policy advice or even being directly used in the CAS and CPS documents. However, these underpinnings provide the Bank with the ability to have an informed dialogue with governments and have a strategic vision around its interventions.

Perceptions on How the Bank Creates and Uses Feedback Loops for Designing Its Country Strategies

The Bank has a limited engagement with stakeholders and needs to adopt a better approach for creating stronger feedback loops. In all of the focus group discussions there was a sentiment that although the Bank consults with stakeholders on country strategies, it is usually more of a formal process. The CPS leads pointed out that it is better for the Bank to engage in ongoing consultations with the stakeholders rather than expect to have informed and well-prepared feedback from a smaller group of stakeholders in the short timeframe during which a CAS or a CPS is prepared. They added that often one-off and quick consultations raise unnecessary expectations among stakeholders as they hope to see the reflection of their ideas and advice in the final document. Additionally, some of the poverty assessment and CAS and CPS leads pointed out that often the stakeholders don’t know enough about the Bank’s work on the ground to be able to provide feedback on the strategy or any other document. It was recommended that the Bank work on raising awareness and engaging with stakeholders.

1 Although the Organization of Eastern Caribbean States includes six independent countries and three British Overseas Territories, the focus group discussions covered only the six independent countries: Antigua and Barbuda, Dominica, Grenada, St. Kitts and Nevis, St. Lucia, and St. Vincent and the Grenadines since they are World Bank client countries.

2 For the purpose of this evaluation, data accessibility is measured by the data available in Development Economic’s central data platforms (such as PovCalNet) and looks at the frequency of the Household Income and Expenditure Survey and the Living Standard Measurement Survey.

3 Only one person disagreed with this general statement, saying that usually it is delegated to other people in a country management unit, and thus the country partnership strategy usually looks more like a collection of sector-based pieces than a strategy.