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# Appraising the Poverty Outreach of Microfinance

*A Review of the CGAP Poverty Assessment Tool (PAT)*

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## Imp-Act

is a global action research programme designed to improve the quality of microfinance services and their impact on poverty.

**Imp-Act** promotes credible and useful impact assessment systems that reflect and respond to client needs, as well as the priorities of microfinance organisations and their stakeholders. The programme is a collaboration between 30 MFOs in 20 countries and a team of academics from the UK universities of Bath and Sheffield, and the Institute of Development Studies, Sussex University. The *Imp-Act* programme was initiated by the Ford Foundation, which funds all *Imp-Act* activities.

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## 1 Overview

Assessment of the poverty level of microfinance clients is important for both practitioners and donors. For practitioners, increased understanding of the target market and whether it is being reached can help in the design of financial services better suited to the needs of different groups of clients. For donors seeking to ensure the most effective use of their scarce resources for combating poverty, poverty assessment is used to assist in making decisions on resource allocation.

While there is much evidence that microfinance can be a critical input towards the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals and the reduction of poverty (Littlefield *et al.* 2003), the impacts of microfinance are not automatic. To achieve significant direct impacts on poverty it is essential that Microfinance Organisations (MFOs)

reach poor and very poor clients, and therefore measurement of poverty outreach becomes an important proxy indicator for the success of microfinance in achieving impacts on poverty.

This paper is aimed at donors, policy-makers and practitioners interested in the mechanisms by which the poverty level of microfinance clients can be assessed. It is primarily a review of the CGAP<sup>1</sup> Poverty Assessment Tool (PAT), and highlights the potential applications for the tool, issues to consider in its use, and possible further steps in the development of the tool. It goes on to consider the broader issue of poverty assessment in microfinance, and proposes an important additional use for the PAT in validating and improving the credibility of low-cost practitioner assessment and monitoring tools.

## 2 The Importance of Assessing Poverty Outreach

As the microfinance industry matures, and competition for clients and donor funding increases, the need for a more detailed and sophisticated understanding of the operating environment becomes clear. For MFOs this means improving

understanding of the market, and the needs and desires of different groups of potential clients. MFOs must also be clear about their mission and operating priorities. For donors there is increasing emphasis on organisational appraisal, and

1. Consultative Group to Assist the Poorest. A consortium of 29 bilateral and multilateral donor agencies who support microfinance.

the need to express donor strategy and priorities through funding decisions.

Sophisticated rating and assessment systems have been developed which help donors and managers assess the efficiency and cost-effectiveness of MFOs, and to make necessary changes to improve performance. Poverty outreach, however, is a neglected area. Although it was a key motivation for microfinance, poverty is often an implicit rather than an explicit objective, and is not given detailed consideration as an organisational objective. Poverty outreach and poverty impact are almost never considered amongst the performance criteria for judging a well-functioning organisation, or in donors' decisions to allocate funding.

There is therefore a need to put poverty outreach back on the agenda. MFOs need to be clear who they wish to serve and why. At the same time, donors should be making transparent funding decisions based on clear statements as to who that funding is designed to reach, and whether it is effective in doing so. For this to occur, poverty needs to be treated as a significant, tangible and measurable quality. Clear and cost-effective

assessment and measurement procedures need to be put in place which allow for reporting on both who is being reached in terms of poverty level, and what impact microfinance services are having on their lives.

Through the development of the PAT, CGAP has taken a major step forward in promoting the inclusion of poverty outreach as a core part of institutional assessment. The PAT is a straightforward and universal tool that can be used by donors in the appraisal of MFOs. It provides transparent and reliable data about the people an MFO is actually reaching, and reinforces the message that poverty outreach must be included in the appraisal and funding of MFOs.

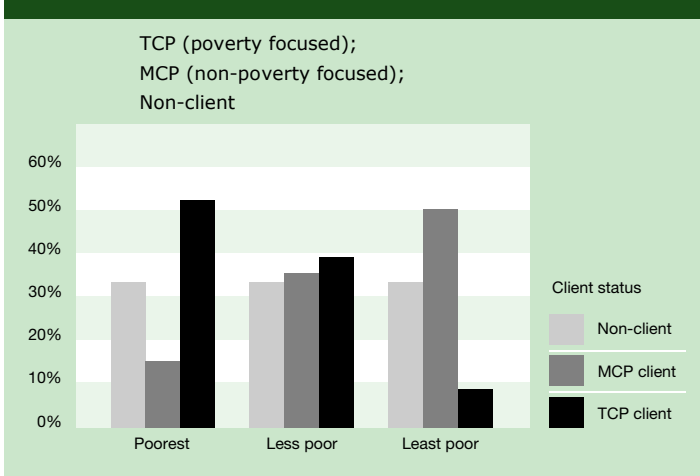
The PAT and other poverty assessment tools facilitate credible assessment of the effectiveness of an MFO in its poverty outreach. MFOs that seek donor poverty alleviation funds can demonstrate significant outreach to the poor and very poor – either through depth of outreach, i.e. a large percentage of clients are very poor; or through scale of outreach, i.e. a large programme that includes very poor people and therefore reaches large numbers.

### 3 The Need for Conscious Poverty-focused Design

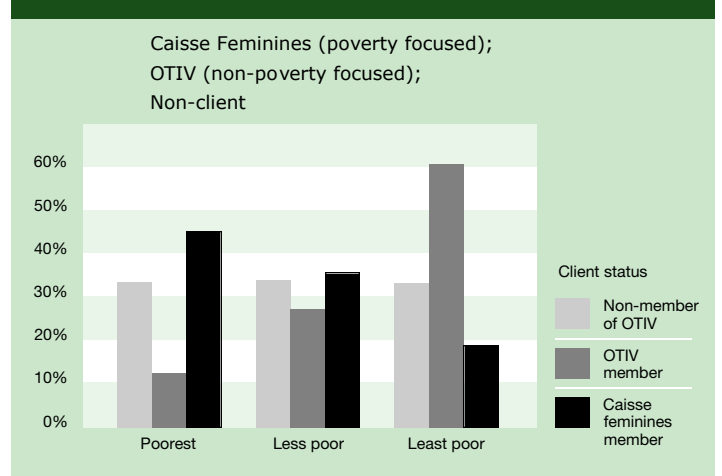
PAT analyses to date demonstrate the importance of a conscious effort by MFOs to differentiate their market by poverty level. It is striking, in the piloting of the PAT in seven countries in four continents, that significant depth of poverty outreach is achieved by the three organisations

that analyse the needs of the very poor, and actively seek to target them (SEF<sup>2</sup>, SHARE<sup>3</sup>, OTIV-Desjardins (Caisse Feminines)<sup>4</sup>). This experience demonstrates that MFOs do not automatically reach the very poor with conventional design features such as small loan sizes, and that there is a need

**FIG 1 SMALL ENTERPRISE FOUNDATION: PERCENTAGE OF CLIENTS WITHIN THREE POVERTY GROUPS**



**FIG 2 OTIV-DESJARDINS: PERCENTAGE OF CLIENTS WITHIN THREE POVERTY GROUPS**



to explicitly consider the needs of the poor and very poor and furthermore, to design programmes specifically to meet these needs (Simanowitz with Walter, 2002).

SEF and Caisses Feminines are particularly interesting examples. Both organisations have two programmes: one based on conventional wisdom that the very poor could be reached through programme design alone, the other designed with

the needs of the very poor explicitly in mind and with active poverty targeting. There is a remarkable contrast between the poverty profiles of these two programmes (see Figures 1 and 2). The clients in the poverty-targeted programmes are overwhelmingly situated in the poorest and poor categories, while the majority of clients in the non-poverty targeted schemes are found in the least poor category.

## 4 Poverty Assessment: the Contribution of the PAT

The PAT was developed to provide a rigorous assessment tool that could be applied by donors at a relatively modest cost. Existing tools were seen to be either too costly and complex (e.g. national household expenditure surveys), or too subjective and localised (e.g. participatory methods)<sup>5</sup>.

As Box 1 shows, a stated aim was to produce data that could be used to compare performance between MFOs nationally and internationally. Based on this objective, a survey method was selected rather than a more participatory, qualitative approach, or a combination of methods. The core of the PAT is an analysis of a sample survey of approximately 200 MFO clients compared to 300 non-clients. The survey collects data on internationally standardised indicators, but is adapted – with the staff of the MFO – to take the local context into account.

Survey-based poverty assessment methods are often criticised for giving a narrow view of poverty which relies heavily on economic measurements. The PAT, however, includes different dimensions of poverty, and combines a number of indicators. These examine current economic status and fulfilment of basic needs; the means to achieve a level of welfare in the present and future, such as assets, human capital and social capital; other aspects of welfare, such as health status and access, access to food, shelter and clothing; and vulnerability to future shocks. Use of multiple indicators enables a more complete description of poverty, but makes comparisons more difficult, as the experiences of poverty they reflect are often so diverse. Furthermore, there is no clear consensus on definitions of “poverty”, which adds to the difficulty in making comparisons. This is solved to a large extent by developing a poverty score which summarises the multiple indicators into a single index. Each indicator is assessed in terms of how accurately it measures differences in poverty, and weighted accordingly. A statistical method –

Principal Component Analysis – assigns a poverty score to each household based on a weighted composite of all the indicators. Relative poverty comparisons are then made between clients and non-clients based on this index.

It is important to emphasise that the PAT looks at the poverty levels of clients compared to non-clients in the same community. It does not by itself measure absolute poverty. The PAT uses a series of relative measures of poverty to compare the poverty levels of clients and non-clients within the MFO operational area. However, by relating data collected from an MFO’s operational area to local, national and ultimately international data, comparisons can be made to assess the position of the local community relative to other communities, the national situation or internationally.

Four ratios, generated by the PAT, are key to the creation of comparable data:

- **Ratio one** looks at the representation of clients in the poorest tercile, such that higher values show

2. SEF is the Small Enterprise Foundation in South Africa.
3. SHARE is a financially self-sufficient microfinance organisation with over 100,000 clients based in India
4. OTIV is a credit and savings cooperative founded in 1993 in Madagascar by the Canadian organisation Desjardins
5. These are discussed in detail in Simanowitz *et al.* (2000). The CGAP Poverty Assessment Tool manual discusses different approaches to poverty assessment [www.cgap.org/html/p\\_other\\_documents.html#IFPRI](http://www.cgap.org/html/p_other_documents.html#IFPRI).

### BOX 1 CGAP’S DESCRIPTION OF THE PAT

The CGAP Poverty Assessment Tool provides transparency on the depth of poverty outreach of MFOs. It provides rigorous data on the levels of clients’ poverty relative to people within the same community through the construction of a multidimensional poverty index that allows for comparisons between MFOs and across countries. It has been primarily designed for donors and investors who would require a more standardised, globally applicable and rigorous set of

indicators to make poverty-focused funding decisions. The tool involves a survey of 200 randomly selected clients and 300 non-clients, takes about four months to complete and costs around US\$10,000. Field tests were successfully completed in four countries. The PAT should be used in conjunction with other appraisal tools (such as the CGAP Appraisal Format) to ensure a holistic understanding of MFOs.

(CGAP 2001)

more extensive outreach to the poorest households in the local area.

- **Ratio two** looks at the proportion of clients who are included in the top tercile (the better-off), such that higher values show a greater outreach to the better off.

- **Ratio three** looks at how poor the MFO's

operational area is in comparison with other regions of the country, such that a score below one indicates that poorer regions are being reached.

- **Ratio four** compares the poverty level at a national level with other countries, such that a value below one indicates that the country is poorer than average for developing countries.

## 5 Issues to consider in the use of the PAT

### 5.1 The Problem of Comparability vs. Relativity

To be useful, the PAT must allow for comparisons to be made between MFOs and across countries. The processing and analysis of relative data to make these absolute comparisons is therefore critical, but to date has generally been under-emphasised in the PAT's implementation and the presentation of results.

The PAT is effective in developing a picture of the relative poverty of client and non-client poverty in an MFO's operational area. It is less effective in comparing poverty assessed at the MFO level to local or national poverty, due to the cost constraints of surveying non-operational areas, and this weakness in the methodology needs to be addressed. Analysis at this level (ratios three and four) has been mostly absent in the PAT's application to date, with the focus being almost entirely on operational area data (ratios one and two). This gives a relative poverty measure, but does not allow for comparisons between MFOs, particularly at a national or international level. The presentation of these results in simplified summary statements and graphs is potentially problematic (see Figure 3). These tend to suggest that comparisons and judgements can be made as to

"how well an MFO is doing" in its poverty outreach. Without the inclusion of ratios three and four these comparisons are inappropriate and misleading.

There is a tendency to make a superficial judgement that the organisation with the greatest number of clients in the poorest tercile is more effective in terms of its poverty outreach. On first glance at Figure 3, for example, it would seem that the poverty outreach for SHARE is far greater than that of ACODEP. But these graphs and statements are limited to ratios one and two, and tell us only about the relative outreach in the MFOs' operational area. Comparisons should not be made between the two MFOs based on this information alone. It is important to measure poverty against an absolute measurement, so that the PAT results can be understood within a broader picture of poverty – regionally, nationally and internationally. For example, an organisation working with high numbers of very poor people within its operational area may not be reaching a high proportion of very poor people compared to the national population, or compared to international poverty lines.

The choice of operational area (geographical targeting), for example, may have a great bearing on the PAT results, as the PAT Manual acknowledges (see Box 3). Where an MFO effectively targets poor areas, and works with very poor communities relative to national poverty, it may be more difficult for it to achieve a high percentage of clients in the poorest category than an MFO working in a relatively well-off area. This is because the people the MFO are trying to serve are the very poorest and are harder to reach than the poorest people in a less poor area.<sup>6</sup> The importance of geographical targeting in ensuring high depth of outreach relative to national or international poverty lines is illustrated by the PAT analysis of SEF in South Africa (Figure 1), which demonstrates that its poverty focused programme, Tshomisano, is operating in some of the poorest communities in one of the poorest provinces in the country.

6. For greater discussion of the processes leading to exclusion of the very poor see Simanowitz with Walter (2002).

### BOX 2 COMPARING PAT RESULTS AT NATIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL LEVEL

'The tool supports comparison of poverty outreach among MFOs and even across countries'

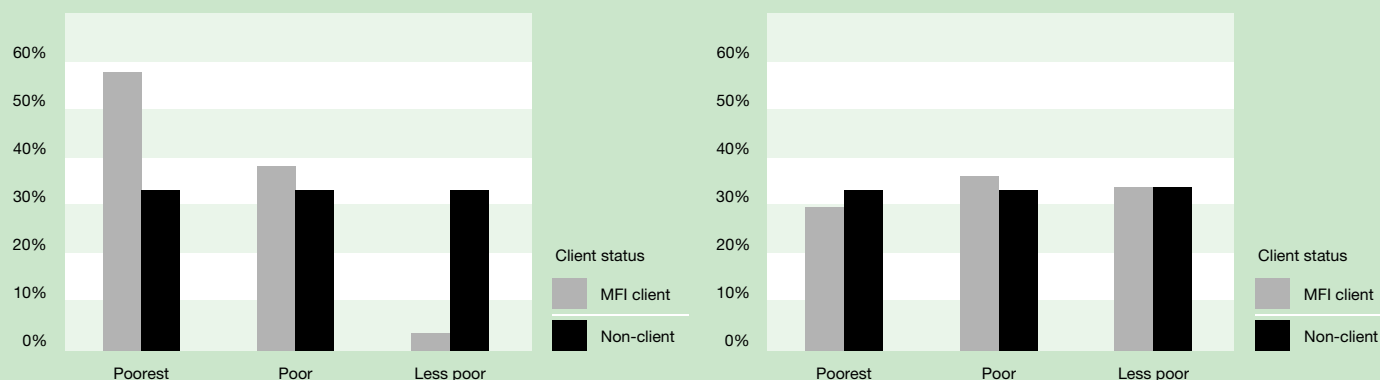
(Henry et al 2000: 2)

'While the first level of assessment [local] has formed the core of this manual, overall conclusions must explicitly

account for area and national level considerations. An overall picture that takes into account all three levels can be developed and presented in a table to form the basis for making final comparisons.'

(ibid: 119)

**FIGURE 3 POTENTIAL MISREPRESENTATION OF RELATIVE DATA:  
SUMMARIES OF PAT RESULTS FROM TWO MFOS<sup>7</sup>**



This indicates that compared to the general population, the poorest households are significantly over-represented and the least-poor are significantly under-represented in SHARE's clientele. This is important evidence of the strong poverty outreach of SHARE.

ACODEP serves a clientele that is quite similar to the general population in its operational area. This result is consistent with its stated objective of reaching micro, small, and medium enterprises through a diversity in the financial products that it offers.

Source of table: CGAP Poverty Targeting: website: [www.ids.ac.uk/cgap/poverty](http://www.ids.ac.uk/cgap/poverty)

Although the analysis states that 52 per cent are in the "poorest" category, if we took the national poverty data into account, a further 39 per cent classified as "poor" might be re-classified as "the poorest".

This discussion demonstrates that the PAT results clearly need to be contextualised, something which can be achieved by a more thorough application of the tool, focusing equally on ratios three and four. The *PAT Manual* suggests using a panel of experts to look at the poverty of the MFO operational area compared to the local, national and international contexts. This strategy could work, provided it was given sufficient emphasis in the survey process and in the presentation and interpretation of results. The use of the tool as part of a more detailed appraisal, such as the CGAP Poverty Audit<sup>8</sup>, would also help to contextualise the poverty outreach numbers in terms of organisational commitment and context.

An alternative could be to use national US\$ per day measures (adjusted for purchasing power parity), and make estimates of where clients fit within these. This information could then be used to relate the terciles presented in the PAT analysis to poverty line estimates, giving a more accurate picture of how the operational level relative client data compared with absolute (national or international) poverty estimates. Data would need to be analysed at three levels:

- **Nationally** – obtaining the national \$/day figures;
- **Locally** – using census data or other existing information to find out the local \$/day figures;
- **MFO operational area** – making a very rough estimate of the MFO client poverty levels from the PAT survey data.

## 5.2 Allowing for Impact effects of the first loan

The PAT Manual allows for clients to be included provided they have not been part of the MFO programme for more than six months. In many cases, therefore, members will have received a loan by the time they are surveyed. While it is difficult to find an entire sample of clients who have not received a loan, this is an issue that needs further consideration.

For poor households, a microfinance loan represents a large injection of cash into the household economy. Even where credit is given for productive purposes, fungibility of the loan (the ease of converting credit given for one purpose to another use), and the recycling of business income into other activities, means that there are likely to be immediate impacts on household expenditure and consumption. The short-term increase in household resources resulting from a loan may lead to changes in MFO clients' perceptions of their level of poverty. This may distort the results of

7. SHARE (India) and ACODEP (Nicaragua).  
8. The Poverty Audit has been developed by CGAP to determine to what extent an MFO's vision and practice addresses issues of poverty and the felt needs of the very poor. It is designed to be used as an integrated element of the CGAP MFO Appraisal Format, and can also be used as a stand-alone tool to determine poverty performance of an MFO and to track performance changes.

### BOX 3 GEOGRAPHICAL VARIATIONS IN POVERTY LEVELS

'A local-level assessment of the relative poverty of MFO clients will not provide a complete picture if MFOs tend to locate in better-off or worse-off areas within a given country. In wealthier regions, the relatively poorer clients may still be better off, on average, than households

living outside the operational area of the MFO, or conversely in poorer regions, higher ranked households may be worse off, on average, than households living outside the MFO's operational area.'

(Henry et al 2000: 120)

many of the indicators measured in the PAT. For example, food quantity and quality are likely to improve in the short term, as is the amount of food stored – an indicator of vulnerability. Similarly the loan may lead to consumptive purchases of assets, clothes or household improvements.

It is therefore critical that the PAT survey attempts to separate changes that have arisen during the loan period from the poverty level prior to the loan, and that the analysis actively looks for a correlation between the receipt of the first loan and some of the indicators more sensitive to short-term change.

### 5.3 Intra-household issues and sampling

The PAT methodology is careful to avoid potential biases. One example is that of the "random walk" sampling method, whereby researchers randomly walk through a community in order to select who should be interviewed. A major potential problem with this method is the clustering of households into areas of different poverty levels. Very often, there tend to be areas where the better-off are concentrated and areas with a high concentration of poorer people. This clustering needs to be taken into account in order to avoid selecting a very biased sample. This is noted in the manual and has been applied in the PAT surveys conducted.

Taking gender into consideration when selecting respondents is not discussed in the *PAT Manual*, but failure to do so can result in a strong bias in the overall analysis. There is considerable evidence from gender-sensitive research that information collected from women and men can vary considerably, particularly with regard to the poverty indicators analysed by the PAT (see for example Jenkins 1991). The PAT focuses on the household as the unit of analysis, and has not looked specifically at this issue (see Box 4). This issue should be further examined, and consistency ensured in selecting which household members are to be interviewed.

### BOX 4 GENDER CONSIDERATIONS IN SELECTION OF RESPONDENTS

'Ideally, both the head of the household and the spouse will respond. In many cases, if this is not possible, having either of these

persons respond is the next best choice.'

(Henry et al 2000: 32)

## 6 Advancing the Poverty Outreach of Microfinance: the Role of the PAT

9. This act requires USAID to demonstrate that 50 per cent of its funding for microenterprise development is targeted to very poor entrepreneurs. For further detail see [www.microfinancegateway.org/highlight\\_usaid.htm](http://www.microfinancegateway.org/highlight_usaid.htm)

The development of the PAT is an important step towards increasing the transparency of reporting of poverty outreach within the microfinance industry. This is particularly important for donors in providing credible information on the basis of which resources can be allocated and policy decisions can be made. However, the cost and complexity of the PAT, combined with its one-off nature, limit its potential to be used in more than a relatively small

number of MFOs. For donors to gather credible information about the poverty outreach of large numbers of MFOs – as required by the *Reauthorisation of the Microenterprise for Self Reliance Act*<sup>9</sup> in the USA for example – or for MFOs to monitor their depth of outreach for their own purpose, simpler and more cost-effective approaches are necessary. A range of low-cost poverty assessment tools are available, but for

these tools to serve their purpose it is important that their credibility is tested and monitored. This could potentially be achieved by using the PAT to test and verify a number of practitioner poverty assessment tools and subsequently by auditing their application as part of institutional assessments or regular auditing of individual MFOs.

**6.1 Using the PAT in donor appraisal of MFOs**

As stated in the introduction, the PAT is particularly suited to donor needs. Piloting has demonstrated that it can be effectively used by local research teams, external to the MFO, to produce results that are clear and easily understood by both MFO staff and donors. Its role in increasing the transparency of reporting on MFO poverty outreach has been demonstrated, and it can be usefully applied by donors in MFO appraisal.

However, the PAT does need to be strengthened to improve comparisons with national and international poverty data. In addition, data on the poverty profile of MFO clients only goes part of the way to understanding and reporting effectiveness in terms of poverty outreach. Ideally, the PAT should be used, not as a stand-alone tool, but as one component of a more comprehensive appraisal of MFO performance. Donor appraisal, using a format such as the CGAP Poverty Audit, has a vital role in ensuring that the methods used are applied effectively, and that MFOs seeking funding on the basis of their poverty impact are able to provide credible ongoing data on their poverty outreach.

**6.2 Strengthening practitioner understanding of clients’ use of poverty assessment tools**

The use of the PAT can significantly contribute to MFO understanding of poverty. The holistic nature of the indicators measured gives a good picture of the key abilities, assets and constraints of people at different levels of poverty. This is valuable information which can contribute greatly to an MFO’s understanding of its clients and potential clients, and can assist appropriate programme design for different client groups. However, there are two major drawbacks of the use of the PAT by MFOs. First, due to cost constraints, it is clearly not feasible for the PAT to be conducted with every MFO. Second, many MFOs would want to integrate poverty assessment into their organisational systems to obtain information on an ongoing basis rather than as a one-off survey, or they may want to obtain information about all of their clients rather than a sample of 200.

Many MFOs employ some form of poverty screening, whereby new clients are assessed against a number of criteria to see if they fit within the target poverty level of clients. There is scope for further developing the PAT so that it can be used as a screening tool. However, this would be based on the specific adaptation of the tool to the context of each MFO, and therefore could only be done as an add-on to a full poverty assessment using the PAT<sup>10</sup>. More challenging is the practice of poverty targeting. In this case the intention is to identify all qualifying households in a community, which then allows for more proactive recruiting of targeted households. The PAT, by definition, works with samples from the community. It does

10. Following the full poverty assessment, the indicators used in the PAT would be incorporated into a short-questionnaire and applied to new clients. Data from individual clients would then be compared to the PAT results to ascertain the poverty level of the client relative to the client group assessed in the PAT.

**TABLE 1 CHOICE OF POVERTY ASSESSMENT TOOL**

TOOLS	PURPOSE			
	Donor appraisal	MFO market information	MFO screening	MFO targeting
<b>PAT</b>	√√ Full external implementation of the PAT	√ By-product of implementation	√ Adaptation of PAT (only following full PAT assessment)	<b>X</b>
<b>MFO Poverty assessment</b>	√ Assessment of rigour of internal system	HI*, check-lists, food-security scale quite limited √√ PWR+ generates detailed understanding of poverty	√√ PWR+ √√ HI* √√ Check-lists	√√ PWR+ √√ HI*

\* HI = Housing Index  
+ PWR = Participatory Wealth Ranking



therefore not give information about enough people in any one community to be used as a targeting tool, and it would be prohibitively expensive to conduct a survey of the whole community for targeting purposes.

A number of other credible, low-cost tools are available which may be more suitable to practitioner needs. These include: participatory methods, such as participatory wealth ranking (PWR); externally visible poverty proxies such as the Cashpor House Index (HI); short proxy indicator questionnaires such as the Freedom from Hunger Food Security Scale; and various "check-list" questionnaires that calculate a poverty score using a small number of proxy indicators (see Simanowitz 2003). These tools are commonly used for targeting but are mostly not used beyond small localised areas<sup>11</sup>. Further work needs to be done in order to facilitate their use for comparisons to national and international poverty-lines. The PAT has a potentially important role in the validation

and strengthening of low-cost tools. Comparing poverty outreach data produced by a low-cost tool and data produced by the PAT for the same MFO allows for verification of this tool. To date, two tools have been validated in this way – Participatory Wealth Ranking and the Housing Index. Furthermore, analysis of the strength of the correlation between individual PAT indicators may assist in the selection of those indicators that link most closely to poverty, and therefore strengthen the low-cost tools.

Given that it is not possible to conduct a PAT with all MFOs, it is essential that where low-cost tools are used by MFOs to provide donors with poverty outreach data, this is externally audited to ensure credibility of the data. Audits would examine the poverty assessment tool's application in each organisation, and the data produced from this. Table 1 gives a summary of the possible application of different poverty assessment tools for different purposes.

## 6 Next Steps

As the microfinance industry works towards the delivery of a range of financial services to a broad range of clients, it is important that a conscious effort is made to identify and understand the needs of clients at different poverty levels. This serves the internal MFO agenda of providing appropriate services to different groups of clients. It also recognises that there is a role for donor funding that encourages outreach to more marginalised, less accessible poorer clients, and promotes incentives for innovation and efficiency in serving

the needs of the poor and very poor.

The CGAP Poverty Assessment Tool, bearing in mind the issues raised in this paper, is a useful one for occasional one-off assessments of poverty outreach, where a high-credibility approach is required. It is likely that this will be used in occasional appraisals of MFOs, but its most important role is likely to be to validate and test the credibility of low-cost poverty assessment tools.

11. An important exception being Participatory Poverty Assessment used extensively by the World Bank.

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