

# Fighting Poverty with Facts

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## Learning how not to be poor in Burkina Faso

*When a community-based monitoring system showed Burkina Faso villagers just how poor they were, in so many ways, they did not like what they saw. They set out to take their development in hand. Community action has led to tangible improvements and new funding sources for key development projects.*

“Before the project, even if we had no food, we didn’t know that we were poor. Today, even if we have food, we know that we are poor.”

So says Amos Yelkouni, who heads the committee that is implementing a system to monitor household living conditions in Lilbouré, a village on the outskirts of Yako, Burkina Faso.

What can a community in a poor country like Burkina Faso hope to gain by better understanding the extent of its poverty? Is a Burkinabe village any better off if it knows the political, social, sanitary, educational, and financial dimensions of its poverty?

One only has to spend a short time with the residents of Lilbouré to see the tremendous amount of self-confidence they have gained by implementing the household welfare monitoring system. From the community leader to the men and women of the village, including the volunteers who interviewed their neighbours, all recognize how two surveys (carried out in 2002 and 2007) have helped to improve their living conditions. And they take great pleasure in showing the very tangible results, including a new fenced vegetable garden, equipped with solar-powered water pumps.

The residents of Lilbouré now have a far more detailed and exact picture of their situation. They understand that poverty is not only measured by the amount of food on their plates, but by many other factors — financial, social, and political. But they also know that their condition is improving.



CBMS Burkina Faso

The results of the community-based poverty monitoring survey spurred villagers to take action to solve pressing problems.

The Centre for International Studies and Cooperation (CECI), a non-governmental organization headquartered in Montréal, Canada, has been leading development activities around Yako for many years. It is thanks to collaboration between CECI and a team composed of Prosper Somda from the Université de Ouagadougou’s Centre d’Études, de Documentation et de Recherches Économique et Sociale (CEDRES), Lassina Konaté of the university’s Unité de Formation et de Recherche en Sciences Économiques et de Gestion, and Michel Koné of the Institut National de la Statistique et de la Démographie that the monitoring system was introduced in Lilbouré.

## A simple but essential system

In 2000, the Government of Burkina Faso prepared a Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (PRSP). The success of implementing the strategy outlined in the PRSP depended on reaching the poorest residents and on establishing a link between the actions undertaken and the results obtained.

The stage was set for developing a Community-Based Monitoring System (CBMS) that would bridge the gaps that were hampering the establishment and implementation of the country's development programs. There was a lack of current, disaggregated data. Communities were not involved in development planning or in local decision-making. There was little coordination between various programs. Moreover, local capacity was weak, particularly in rural areas where up to 90% of the population are illiterate.

The decentralization process that has been underway in Burkina Faso since 1995 further increases the relevance of the monitoring system. Even though the resources needed to make it a success have not yet materialized, decentralization is moving ahead. It is up to the local populations to take charge of their future. Given that one of the objectives of the monitoring system is to identify poverty indicators that communities can regularly measure (and can regularly update themselves), the system could become one of the cornerstones of the decentralization process.

According to Prosper Somda, the monitoring system introduced meets the needs of rural communities because it is simple and practical. It is an inexpensive means of gathering the data needed to draw poverty profiles at the local level. "The experience of villages located on the outskirts of Yako is proof of this," he says.

### About CBMS

The Community-Based Monitoring System (CBMS) is an organized way of collecting, analyzing, and verifying information at the local level to be used by local governments, national government agencies, non-governmental organizations, and civil society for planning, budgeting, and implementing local development programs. It also serves to monitor and evaluate their performance. Piloted in the Philippines in 1994, it is now being implemented in 14 countries of Africa, Asia, and Latin America.

Somda is convinced that the CBMS — developed as part of research initially supported by Canada's International Development Research Centre (IDRC) to determine micro impacts of macroeconomic and adjustment policies — will prove indispensable. It remains the only data-gathering tool that local communities can use to design development plans on the basis of reliable data, at the village, departmental, and provincial levels.

## The CBMS process

Following pilot tests and fine-tuning, the monitoring system rolled out in Yako and five neighbouring villages in 2002. Getting the system up and running was no easy task: the communities that participated in the trial had few members with sufficient schooling to collect and classify data, much less analyze it.

The research team selected relevant indicators to monitor and determined that the survey should be conducted twice a year: during the dry season (November to May) and during the rainy season (June to October). The team proposed collecting food security and health indicators twice a year, and other indicators, such as household revenue, annually.

When Somda's team arrived in the Yako area, it described the system and explained how the communities would contribute. The team pointed out that the monitoring system was not a typical development project, but would give the community tools to find their own means of improving their lives. They asked that each village identify interviewers: they had to be between 18 and 40 years of age, have at least three years of formal schooling, and know Mòoré — the local language — as well as have sufficient free time to participate. Of the 29 selected for training in survey techniques, 17 were retained as interviewers and four were selected as supervisors.

The village authorities gave their full backing to the survey team, which was supported by university staff from Ouagadougou and CECI facilitators.

In June and July 2002, data was collected from 1283 households in Yako and surrounding areas. "We asked to meet the head of the household," explains Yelkouni. "After that, we met his wives, each of them, one after another. Every person was interviewed. Everybody answered the questions."

The surveys collected two categories of indicators: *simple indicators* that the local survey teams could analyze to draw lessons the Village Development Committees could use immediately with local populations, and *complex indicators* that needed to be processed by computer. Data processing was done manually to respect the CBMS principle of community control and use. The research team helped aggregate and analyze the data electronically.



CBMS Burkina Faso

**An innovation: the survey data was translated into easy-to-understand drawings.**

Because of the high level of illiteracy, communicating the results back to the community posed a particular challenge. The solution: translate the data into easy-to-interpret drawings on paper and blackboards, one for each indicator — population size, health and nutrition, sanitation, education — posted at the village assembly offices. These drawings have also been used to illustrate handbooks and the information has been translated into Mòoré.

## Signs of progress

In Lilbouré, making the results of the first survey public sparked a new awareness and galvanized the community. Residents saw themselves reflected in the mirror for the first time.

There were areas of contention, however. Some of those interviewed, for instance, had deliberately under-reported their food stocks, in the hope of receiving more. When the data was presented to the community for validation, “they realized that they hadn’t told the truth. After, they asked if they could answer the questions again.”

According to Bernadette Boukougou, a CECI facilitator living near the village, the first survey brought the people of Lilbouré together. In fact, the survey results spurred the villagers into action. They built retaining structures to capture rainwater for agriculture, thus increasing crops and reducing hunger, a prime poverty indicator in the village. Solar-powered pumps were installed around a large community garden.

A second survey was conducted in 39 villages and 7 sectors of Yako in 2007, allowing a comparison of poverty indicators — and of progress — between the two surveys. The later survey was conducted by the Village Development Committee and the communities themselves, with only minimal involvement of the CBMS team. In effect, the community had taken ownership of the CBMS.

CBMS was also extended to two new sites — the departments of Diébougou in 2006 and of Koper in 2007. These later additions complement national efforts to improve participatory poverty monitoring, as recommended in the 2004 PRSP.

Both surveys in Yako confirmed that a high percentage of the population was very young (almost half were under 15). It also showed that there was a serious need for community investment, mainly in the health and education sectors, and a need for greater involvement in associations.

The studies showed some improvements between the two surveys: more houses had proper roofs, cement floors, and beds. There was greater access to water, radios, and lanterns. However, there was still no electricity in rural areas, and one family out of three still did not have access to potable water, leaving them exposed to water-borne diseases.

A notable sign of progress was in education. The first survey had revealed that only 40% of children were registered in primary school: that number had doubled by 2007. Sadly however, overall enrolment was on the decline, from 84% in 2002 to 74% in 2007.

In 2002, 70% of respondents had said they did not have enough to eat. By 2007, thanks largely to the community’s efforts, this number dropped to 40%. Families had larger cereal stocks and ate meat and fish more often. Malnutrition still hindered children’s physical and intellectual development, however. Health service provision had improved with the addition of six primary health centres. Rates of illness had also dropped. More people reported improved hygiene, including a greater use of soap.

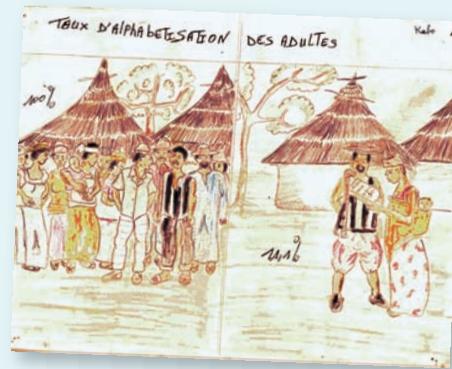
In Diébougou, the success of a pilot project in five localities led to a survey of the entire commune — close to 40 000 people in 23 villages — to prove that CBMS was feasible and convince national and local authorities of its value in complementing the national statistical system.

## The domino effect

Signs of progress in Lilbouré are obvious, as is the energy of the villagers and the community spirit that motivates them. Neighbouring villages have been inspired by what they see: nine of them have asked for information on how to set up vegetable gardens. "The other villages want to follow our lead," say Lilbouré residents. But, reminds their spokesperson, progress comes at a cost: work must be organized, there are meetings to attend, dues to pay, assemblies to be held. Lilbouré residents obviously think it's a price worth paying and have embraced the process wholeheartedly.

Securing much-needed funds and human resources from outside sources remains the main obstacle to updating the data. Somda has no doubts about the system's low cost. However, he is convinced that it can only be used if communities have access to additional revenues.

Those revenues may come from a variety of sources. For instance, in late April 2008, the mayor of Yako reported that the CBMS results had enabled him to negotiate funding for priority development projects. "Whoever has



information is wealthy," he says. "I needed reliable data. I was working in the dark which made it difficult to obtain financing. The CBMS results are already being used to improve people's welfare."

*This case study was written by Jean-Marc Fleury, former director of IDRC's Communications Division, with Michelle Hibler, senior writer at IDRC.*

*The views expressed in this case study are those of IDRC-funded researchers and of experts in the field.*

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