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# *Strengthening Rapid Assessments in Urban Areas: Lessons from Bangladesh and Tanzania*

James L. Garrett and Jeanne Downen

Understanding urban issues is extremely important for programming, especially for organizations that have traditionally focused on assisting poor households and communities in rural areas. Development organizations and governments frequently use rapid assessment methods because they have limited resources and little time to devote to longer-term, more complex research projects. Generally these methods employ qualitative techniques to solicit information from relatively small numbers of people in a short time. Researchers have raised questions about the reliability of these methods, and policy makers and other development practitioners, the primary audience for the findings if they are to have impact, sometimes doubt the validity of findings. This paper holds up CARE's experiences with rapid assessments in Bangladesh and Tanzania to widely accepted criteria for sound social science research: basically, whether feasible and ethical methods can generate accurate, valid, and reliable results that others, such as programmers and policy makers, will find useful. Experiences in Bangladesh and Tanzania suggest that the principal challenges to the validity of rapid assessments in urban areas can be met through use of representative samples; integration of qualitative and quantitative approaches; incorporation of team members with a variety of perspectives, knowledge areas, and professions; and linkages with local organizations and community members who are familiar with the economic, political, social, and cultural context of the city.

**Key words:** rapid assessment procedures, urban, research methods, livelihood security, Bangladesh, Tanzania

By 2025, over half the population in Asia and Africa will live in urban areas, as will more than 80 percent of those in Latin America (UN 2001). Governments and development agencies clearly must pay increasing attention to the needs of the urban poor and develop programs that take complex urban realities into account. But much of their understanding of livelihoods is built from a rural, agrarian knowledge base.

Rapid assessments are one way governments and development organizations can quickly gain an understanding of local urban conditions and identify programming needs. Rapid assessment methods generally employ teams to obtain information quickly from relatively small numbers of people. They use qualitative, frequently ethnographic and often participatory, techniques. By using a number of different

approaches, a team can triangulate and increase confidence in its findings (Beebe 1995). Rapid assessments are often used in rural areas, and so include the well-known rapid rural assessments (RRA) and participatory rural appraisals (PRA) (Chambers 1994, 1997). They are less frequently employed to assess the livelihoods and needs of the urban poor (Moser and McIlwaine 1999; Ervin 1997; IIED 1994).

In 1997, CARE field offices in Bangladesh and Tanzania responded to rising concern about the urban poor by investigating urban conditions in those countries. CARE, the international relief and development nongovernmental organization (NGO), used rapid assessments to analyze needs and opportunities as part of the diagnostic phase of project and strategy planning. This is an appropriate use for rapid assessments as they provide relatively quick results that are sound enough for preliminary design and strategy decisions (Beebe 2001).

In these exercises, CARE faced two main challenges: strengthening assessment methods generally, and adapting approaches developed for rural areas to urban ones. Drawing on the authors' experience as technical advisors and team members involved in these assessments, this paper describes how CARE's assessments addressed both these challenges. A number of other sources describe general approaches and specific tools for rapid assessments, as well as general considerations and concerns about the use of rapid assessment procedures, and they will not be detailed here (Beebe 2001,

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2002; Campbell 2001; Utarini, Winkvist, and Pelto 2001; Holland 1998; Scrimshaw and Hurtado 1987; IDS 2002; IIED 2002; RCPLA 2002).

Instead, this paper first describes assessment methods and logistics of the exercises in each country. It then outlines some widely accepted criteria for sound research and holds the assessment approaches in both countries up to these criteria. The paper notes the particular methodological challenges faced by rapid assessments and describes ways to respond to potential problems found particularly in urban areas. The paper gives guidance based on practical experience for strengthening the approach methodologically without sacrificing its fundamental characteristics. Documenting these experiences also helps fill a gap in the literature on the use and impact of rapid assessment methods by nongovernmental organizations.

### **Rapid Urban Assessments: Rationale, Methods, and Logistics**

CARE employs a household livelihood security model to guide holistic assessments and identify key leverage points for programming (Frankenberger, Drinkwater, and Maxwell 2000; Frankenberger and McCaston 1999). Rapid assessments support this approach by allowing staff to build a comprehensive, multidimensional picture of livelihoods in a short time. Staff, partner organizations, and the community use findings to diagnose major problems affecting livelihood security; highlight critical linkages between problems, such as the interaction among infrastructure deterioration, poor sanitation, and disease; and design more effective projects.

Rapid assessments are particularly useful in providing information about the specific site where a development organization implements a project. Data from secondary sources often provide only aggregate data for a large geographic area, such as the city as a whole, obscuring the characteristics of any one community.

Assessments also help orient an organization's staff to a mix of methods they can use in their work, including various information-gathering techniques and frameworks for analyzing data. Working together in the field allows an NGO, governments, and potential partner organizations to learn about each other, strengthen working relationships, and establish a basis for future collaboration. Information generated by the assessment is itself an investment in knowledge. The data provide a basic reference on community life that participants, donor agencies, government officials, and community members can return to for additional analysis.

### **Assessment Methods and Logistics**

According to the United Nations (2001), the total estimated population for Tanzania was 30 million in 1995, of whom 8 million lived in urban areas; the total for Bangladesh was 119 million, with 26 million classified as urban dwellers. Assessments were carried out in three communities in

each of three cities in Bangladesh: Khulna, Tongi, and Bogra (Sutter and Perine 1998). These cities vary greatly in size. According to the latest census (1991), for example, Khulna had 1 million people and Bogra, 130,000. Tongi is a suburb of Dhaka, a metropolitan area with an estimated 10 million people. In Tanzania, the assessment was carried out in 12 administrative districts, or wards, of Dar es Salaam, which had an estimated population of 1.87 million in 1995 (CARE Tanzania 1998).

Assessments used a number of different tools (transect walks and semistructured interviews, for example), methods (qualitative or quantitative), and respondents (key informants or focus groups) at different levels (community, household, individual). They gathered information on a range of characteristics of urban communities and households (Figure 1). The variety of approaches and units of analysis served to confirm and verify—to triangulate—information from one source with those from another.

With approval of local political leaders, CARE worked with community-based organizations (CBOs) to interview two or three key informants in each site. Key informants, often community leaders or school teachers, described community history, infrastructure, services, and resident characteristics. They also helped to develop community maps.

Large-group interviews with separate groups of men and women (15–20 people each) covered community history, services, and priorities. In the large-group interviews, community residents also developed seasonal calendars that described fluctuations in employment, disease, food prices, and food availability, among other items.

In focus groups of six to ten persons each, individuals selected for certain shared characteristics (such as female-headed households, unemployed young men, or rickshaw drivers) discussed their livelihood strategies and specific threats to them. In Tanzania, focus-group interviews were also held with groups that were not necessarily poor but were important to development and on which information was lacking, such as young adults.

Local firms with expertise in household surveys administered the quantitative surveys. CARE staff and, in Tanzania, staff from potential local partner organizations collected primary qualitative data. In Bangladesh, CARE staff formed three teams led by women and composed of four men and four women each. In Dar es Salaam, four teams of eight people each carried out the qualitative work. Those teams included staff from other organizations as well as CARE, including NGOs and universities that could use the information and might form partnerships with CARE in the future.

Data were collected in a fairly set sequence. In both countries, external consultants conducted a review of relevant available literature before primary data collection began. Quantitative surveys preceded qualitative data collection, although complete results were not available before conducting qualitative interviews.

In Bangladesh, key informant interviews took place before the large-group and focus-group interviews. In Tanzania,

**Figure 1. Technique Integration and Triangulation**

Level of Analysis	Data Collection Techniques	Key Questions
Community	Secondary data Key informants Observation	Indicators of urban livelihood security Community profile Community infrastructure Community institutions Community perceptions <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• services</li> <li>• sources of vulnerability</li> <li>• priorities</li> <li>• problems and needs</li> </ul>
	Community (large-group) surveys (men and women)	
Household	Focus groups	Livelihood strategies <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• economic security</li> <li>• food security</li> <li>• health security</li> <li>• housing security</li> <li>• educational security</li> <li>• community participation</li> <li>• demographic characteristics</li> <li>• problems and solutions</li> </ul>
	Household survey	
Individual	Nutrition survey	Nutritional status of children Nutritional status of women Household food consumption (frequency and diversity) Reproductive health Water and sanitation

key informant interviews were carried out at the same time as other qualitative interviews. Teams were thus less familiar with the sites because they did not have the key informant results beforehand. In Bangladesh, key informants and CBO staff identified people to invite to the large-group discussions. In Dar es Salaam, because CBOs in the communities tended to be weak, invitations to community residents were extended through local government officials.

Interviews with large groups and focus groups took two days. The large-group, community-level interviews took place on the first day. At their conclusion, staff determined the characteristics of the focus groups they wanted to form. Focus-group interviews were held the following day. Teams encouraged those in the large group selected for a focus group to invite friends or colleagues who met the focus-group criteria to attend. Interviews were held with four

focus groups (two for men and two for women) in each community.

For analysis, each day team members entered their interview notes into matrices set up on personal computers. These matrices tracked respondents' answers to each question. After completion of data collection, on the third day, the Bangladesh teams used problem trees for causal analysis of the data. Teams constructed problem trees by identifying a problem (the "tree") and then, using the collected data, wrote down on note cards the conditions, behaviors, and beliefs that shaped the context or formed the "roots" of the problem. Team members placed these cards on the wall or floor and then arranged them to "link" causes and problems in a logical, often causal, way. The teams then critically reviewed their problem trees to identify key constraints. On the fourth day, they aggregated the analysis across communities and identified potential areas for programming in each city.

Tanzanian teams also initially analyzed the data for each community using problem trees. They then did more in-depth analysis to identify linkages among problems and what problems were most prevalent across communities. In Tanzania, a second analysis and strategy workshop was held two months after the initial survey. Participants in this four-day workshop included most members of the original teams as well as local experts in specific potential program areas, such as water and sanitation or health. Workshop participants received documents summarizing findings from the assessment beforehand. Combined with available information on CARE's mission, donor interest, and activities of other NGOs and CBOs in the city, workshop participants then identified priority areas for CARE's work.

### **Strengthening Rapid Urban Assessment Procedures**

In the complex urban environment, any method that seeks to rapidly produce a complete but reliable picture of urban life faces formidable challenges. The heart of the matter is whether to trust the results (Beebe 2001). Since the results will inform policies and programs, they must be reliable. Often, however, policy makers doubt the validity of findings from rapid assessments, and researchers have raised serious questions about the reliability and proper use of the methods (Campbell 2001; Utarini, Winkvist, and Pelto 2001). Teams must ensure their approach is methodologically sound so they can defend their results persuasively (Freudenberger 1998). The remainder of this paper focuses on ways to meet the significant methodological challenges to rapid assessments in urban areas.

Harris, Jerome, and Fawcett (1997) provide a critical overview of the main threats to the credibility of rapid assessments. They urge practitioners to pay close attention to methods to ensure they meet widely accepted research standards. These standards include accuracy (context and also construct, measurement, and external validity), reliability, feasibility, utility, and propriety.<sup>1</sup>

### **Context**

*Does the assessment adequately account for the economic, political, social, and cultural context?* Urban dwellers enjoy relatively rapid and easy communication among themselves. They have close ties to the market economy. Macroeconomic conditions, such as inflation and structural adjustment programs, and complex political conditions can have significant impact on the urban poor. Given their origins in sociological and anthropological methods, rapid assessments usually pay close attention to the social and cultural aspects of a community, but they may overlook important economic and political factors external to the community. Another important aspect of urban life is the overlay and diversity of "communities." In rural areas, settlements are isolated geographically, and different "communities" tend to overlap. Rural assessments can reasonably assume that social and economic networks inside the geographic community provide much of the day-to-day support for livelihood strategies. In urban areas, however, individuals can belong to many different "communities." These may be based on gender, religion, ethnicity, or occupational group. For example, in Bangladesh rickshaw operators are a highly organized group linking neighborhoods across a city.

In urban areas, the numbers are great enough, and the distances small enough, that households can link with their many communities fairly easily and so access resources outside the neighborhood's geographic, usually administrative, boundaries. An urban assessment must account for a household's participation in these various communities, including the resources they provide or the threats they pose to the household.

*Responses.* In these assessments, CARE's household livelihood security framework provided a guideline that highlighted inclusion of contextual factors in the survey. The framework itself emphasizes the importance of the social, cultural, and political environment, and the links between different aspects of livelihood security, such as income, health, and nutrition. Data from secondary sources or specially commissioned studies gave additional context. In Bangladesh, for example, CARE reviewed a comprehensive report on urban poverty just completed by the Asian Development Bank (1996), and commissioned Bangladesh University of Engineering and Technology, Dhaka (1997), to do an additional study on the operations of NGOs working in urban Bangladesh.

### **Construct Validity**

*Are we correctly interpreting what we observe?* The construct validity of traditional ethnography is presumed to be high because researchers spend years observing and living in the community (Harris, Jerome, Fawcett 1997). Rapid rural assessments may also be able to claim relatively higher levels of construct validity because, in general, researchers and NGOs in developing countries have greater knowledge

about rural livelihoods than urban ones. Researchers unfamiliar with an urban environment may misinterpret responses or behaviors. They may not be prepared to explore an issue with the respondent to understand it, to challenge it, or to pursue it further.

*Responses.* Rapid assessments in urban areas need not pose serious problems if team members are familiar with urban conditions and issues. Training sessions presented the conceptual framework and reviewed urban livelihood issues for the teams. Because team members were primarily Bangladeshi or Tanzanian and resided in urban areas, they had first-hand knowledge of local urban conditions. In Tanzania, potential local partner NGOs working in the communities under study and urban researchers joined the teams, providing a check on interpretation. Later, local officials also had a chance to comment on findings.

To improve interpretation and contribute to context and construct validity, teams should possess a diversity of knowledge, backgrounds, and experience. Members should vary in ethnicity, gender, and age. Without these different observational and analytical “lenses,” teams may miss or misinterpret what they see (Erickson and Stull 1998).

In these assessments, women and men of different ages were represented equally on the teams. They possessed different areas of expertise, including health, credit, education, urban development, and gender, and had varied educational backgrounds, such as economics, sociology, political science, and medicine. In Tanzania, to further check validity, each team presented a synthesis of its findings to the entire group the day following the interviews. Members of other teams provided comments, which were then incorporated into the next day’s approach. In Bangladesh, teams undertook further analysis of the data at a week-long session after completing data collection.

The analysis sessions posed perhaps the greatest challenge to construct validity. Despite a range of expertise and perspectives on each team, individuals logically tended to use their own analytical lenses. Sometimes it was difficult for team members to go beyond their particular perspectives, which were based on their own experiences or training. For example, in Tanzania, those from the education sector focused on education; those involved with water and sanitation saw the greatest problems in that area.

While such expertise is necessary and welcome, assessment leaders have to ensure that these points of view help to interpret the data, not lead the team to preordained conclusions. To counter this possibility, leaders had to encourage all team members to contribute and insist that teams back up causal analyses with data, rather than relying on impressions and anecdotes.

## Measurement Validity

*Do our instruments measure what we intend to measure? Do the instruments and methods allow us to collect appropriate and accurate information?* Challenges to measurement

validity arose in five principal areas: choosing the appropriate population of analysis; interviewing the most appropriate respondent; making questions understandable; addressing sensitive topics; and removing sources of bias in answers.

For valid results, researchers need to define and survey the population of interest accurately. For instance, two surveys that calculated the prevalence of urban agriculture could give very different results if one surveyed households only within an urban core and another surveyed an entire metropolitan region, which could include peri-urban areas with more agriculturally based households.

The assessment must also ask the “right” questions of the “right” people. While women may know most about child care and home hygiene, men may make budget decisions. Women and men may have different perceptions of social networks and power relations within the community. The poorest and most disenfranchised members of the community may have different perspectives than the well-off, who exist even in urban slums.

Interviewing the right person may not be easy. In rural areas, researchers can meet with individuals at home or in the fields during the day. In cities, both men and women commonly work outside the home, often outside the community, and not on their own time. Urban dwellers tend to be home in the evening, yet many urban neighborhoods are unsafe at night. The most likely time to find urban residents at home, then, may be the most dangerous for interviewer and respondent.

Urban residents remain concerned about traditionally sensitive topics such as domestic violence. But with better communications, contacts outside the community, and greater exposure to different ways of life, they may worry less about social and more about legal consequences when answering questions. Researchers must also make sure that respondents clearly understand the questions by using locally familiar concepts and terms.

Proximity, ease of transportation and communication, and the multiple authorities that intervene in urban lives make it common for government leaders, community leaders, and even local crime bosses to want to sit in on and potentially influence the interviews. Residents may also see the interviewer as a powerful outside agent. The presence of influentials (either community residents or the interviewers themselves) and the subtext of unequal power relations may lead respondents to say what they think the more powerful want to hear, rather than what they really think (Beebe 2001).

*Responses.* The assessments needed to make sure that the area of analysis—the city—was well-defined, but how to define “the city?” In Bangladesh and Tanzania the boundaries of the city, at least in terms of typical urban characteristics like dense population and lack of widespread agriculture, were not easily identifiable. The urban agglomerations rose up gradually from the countryside. Where did the city begin and the countryside end?

Because urban, peri-urban, and rural areas often share characteristics that differ mostly in degree, trying to distinguish

precise dividing lines among them is often an impossible task and may not be especially useful. It is more important to identify the area or the population about which information is needed than to define what is urban and what is rural. This definition should take into account the boundaries of the community as perceived by residents (Moser and McIlwaine 1999) as well as the needs of the study itself. The assessment report needs to make these limits and the focus of the study clear.

The assessments in Bangladesh did not need to be—and were not—representative of the entire urban area, but only of the urban slums. In both countries, CARE limited its assessments to the administrative boundaries of the city because it reasoned that any initial intervention would go through the city administration.

The need to be clear about the population under study can extend even to analyses within the study boundaries. In Bangladesh, for instance, the study area contained culturally and socially distinct subpopulations. In Bogra, there were entire communities of Biharis, Urdu-speaking refugees stranded since the War of Independence, and sweepers, lower-status residents who cleaned latrines. The assessment interviewed these groups separately. To have included them as simply part of an “urban average” would have missed their fascinating histories and unique livelihood strategies.

Working with local partners and scheduling interviews around residents’ availability help to collect information from the most appropriate respondents. This worked better in Bangladesh than in Tanzania. In Bangladesh, CBOs known to CARE arranged the large-group interviews several days ahead of time. CARE asked CBO staff to select a cross-section of the poor in the community. Unfortunately, in Tanzania, because CBOs were weak and a single-party political structure predominated, CARE had to work through government officials. Although similar instructions were given, CARE was not as well-known, nor did it have the same level of confidence in government officials as the teams in Bangladesh did. The Tanzanian team had to be alert to the possibility that government officials chose residents who would speak well of the government and triangulate with other sources of information.

In addition, in Bangladesh, interviews were carried out in the evening or on days off, so individuals could plan to attend. In Tanzania, however, staff felt communities were too dangerous after dark to conduct interviews, so interviews took place only during the day. This potentially biased the results toward those who were at home or in the community during the day and could have skewed the profile of employment. Interviewing in the early morning or on days off and being persistent about scheduling interviews with the household could have reduced bias in the quantitative sample.

This source of bias probably had less impact on the qualitative work. While the quantitative survey presumed a statistically representative sample of the entire community, qualitative interviews generated community- or individual-level information. In the large groups, participants likely knew

about community history and services, although the fact that they were chosen through government structures may have caused answers to favor the government. This sort of bias was not present in the focus groups.

To ensure that interviewers and respondents understood the questions, team members took the original English version of the questionnaires and translated them into Bangla or Ki-Swahili. Teams then held further discussions to arrive at a consensus about the translation. In Tanzania, participants back-translated the questionnaire to English to confirm their work. Extensive field testing and discussion confirmed the validity of the translations or led to modifications.

The extent of illegal activities was difficult to get at using household surveys, but women in focus groups were surprisingly candid about common illegal activities, such as smuggling saris across the Indian border for sale. Issues such as corruption or prostitution tended to emerge in the key-informant and large-group interviews, where individuals could speak generally and not have to identify anyone specifically. To reduce reluctance to address sensitive topics, women and men were interviewed separately by teams of their own gender.

Interviewers attempted to increase the confidence of respondents by having trusted CBOs or other local partners introduce the interviewers and the study, and by stressing the importance of honest answers. Respondents would often open up more in the focus groups, especially on topics of sexual diseases or crime, when they were more familiar with staff (who had interviewed them in the large groups) and outside the presence of a large group of neighbors or of influentials. This was true of both men and women.

In both countries, to gain some idea of the source and degree of bias from influentials, facilitators asked questions at the start of the qualitative interviews about the occupation and background of each individual, how they found out about the interview, and who invited them. The team then judged whether the group reflected the diversity of the community. In Bangladesh teams separated out community leaders who might influence participants’ opinions for individual interviews. This removed the influence of these individuals from the group and added and verified information.

In obtaining answers, however, an organization’s own reputation may precede it. Residents in Bangladesh knew that CARE often built roads in rural areas, for instance. When residents stated they wanted CARE to build roads, it was unclear whether that was because building roads was indeed a community priority or because they thought CARE would be more predisposed to build roads than undertake other interventions.

## External Validity

*Are conclusions generalizable beyond the data at hand?*  
The mobility of households and the rapidity of economic change can make it difficult to generalize survey findings from one city to another, or from a few neighborhoods to the

entire city, even with a representative sample. Of course, qualitative surveys often do not attempt to obtain a representative sample, but for assessments trying to uncover a picture of the entire community, this may be a particularly critical limitation. Paying attention to sampling procedures, which apply to qualitative as well as quantitative research, can strengthen rapid assessments.

*Responses.* For generalizability, choosing a representative sample is essential. Although qualitative work generally does not select enough units of analysis (individuals, households, or communities) to apply valid statistical tests, careful selection of these units in relation to the overall population of interest can begin to allow a reliable picture of the population to emerge.

With small numbers it is critical to account for potential sources of bias—factors that might cause the sample to somehow differ from the population of interest. Researchers should first identify key factors and then select units that represent extremes of these factors, insofar as known and practicable. Teams must be sure to analyze results along these lines to look for differences. Often, despite stratifying along these factor lines, analysis simply lumps all the groups together again.

A principal objective of these assessments was to get an overview of the livelihoods of the urban poor that could be reasonably generalized across the country (Bangladesh) or across the city (Dar es Salaam). In Bangladesh, because city size might affect findings, with smaller cities more like rural areas, assessments were carried out in three cities of varying size. In Tanzania, CARE collected data from 12 sites chosen to capture diversity within Dar es Salaam. Characteristics of the sites included planned and unplanned settlements; central and peripheral areas; areas with varying proportions of recent migrants; more and less densely populated areas; and areas with and without sufficient infrastructure and services.

Although the Bangladesh study was not nationally representative, the assessment did provide initial ideas about how urban issues differed or were shared across cities. The degree of social cohesion and availability of infrastructure seemed to vary by location, but employment tended to be casual with seasonal peaks and troughs. In Tanzania, access to health services and water was a concern in all communities, but the assessment highlighted differences among them. Central urban areas, for instance, suffered from broken water pumps and water mains, but in peri-urban areas, no infrastructure existed to begin with. Researchers could compare and contrast these findings with other sources of information to gauge how generalizable findings were.

## Reliability

*Can the procedures generate the same results repeatedly?* If findings are not robust, an organization should be wary of basing funding decisions on an assessment's outcome since findings may not accurately represent the community's needs and constraints. The representativeness

of the sample and the ability of those carrying out the assessment are two key factors that affect an assessment's reliability. Interviewers who are not well-grounded in methods, or the use of tools that are not standardized or are inappropriate, will add to variation. If the characteristics of the individuals interviewed vary greatly each time, findings will also vary.

In rural areas, assessments often gather individuals for qualitative interviews, staking out a central location and waiting for people to gather at the designated spot. Soon there are enough people to conduct a fairly comprehensive community interview. But in urban neighborhoods, such a central place may not exist, and those simply passing by may not adequately represent the diversity of livelihoods in the area. In fact, they may not be residents, but simply work in the area, and have little knowledge of community concerns. On the other hand, residents may work outside the community. With greater "social independence," urban dwellers may have less sense of the problems and constraints, as well as the coping strategies, of their neighbors than do rural residents. For all these reasons, a spontaneously formed group in an urban area may not capture an appropriate cross-section of the community.

In some cases, representativity is not the objective. More purposive sampling, for example, is appropriate when selecting individuals for focus groups, where often the objective is to get a homogenous group that shares a specific characteristic (Patton 1990). Even this approach, however, must contend with unknown biases.

Beyond sampling concerns, the greatest threat to reliability comes from the inability to use research tools consistently. Organizational staff may not possess the skills needed to carry out interviews. Quantitative surveys require substantial expertise to ensure appropriate sampling strategies and accurate recording of data, especially when taking anthropometric measures or measures of expenditure and food consumption. Experienced qualitative interviewers often follow only a broad guideline and allow the conversation to flow, pursuing topics as they arise. Producing good, consistent data with this method requires substantial knowledge and experience to ensure questions are asked in a consistent way and that responses are adequately probed.

*Responses.* CARE wanted some results to reflect the community as a whole and others to elucidate livelihood strategies of a particular group. For community-level perspectives, in Bangladesh the quantitative survey used a cluster-sampling methodology to randomly select about 300 households in each city (Bennett et al. 1994; Bennett 1993). This Expanded Program on Immunization (EPI) method is a fairly simple, relatively low-cost way to select a random sample. In Tanzania, the consulting firm conducted a simple random survey in the survey sites, although the fact that many households were not present during the day may have biased results somewhat.

For the qualitative interviews, in Bangladesh CARE worked with CBOs familiar with the area to select key

informants and to invite specific participants to the community interviews. This eased access to community residents and provided a cross-section of the community. Still, this approach could have unwittingly biased results. Logically, organizations will select people for interviews from among those with whom they are most familiar, and these people may differ in some unknown way from the general population of the community. Even with reasonable sampling strategies, then, verifying findings with triangulation is still important.

Given the relatively low level of experience among staff and partners, the Bangladesh and Tanzania assessments used a standardized guideline of topics to enhance consistency across interviewers. Each interview was conducted by one facilitator and recorded by one note taker. Interviewers were encouraged to probe answers where appropriate and to solicit opinions from all members of the group, but, given the guidelines, the data were still usable even if the interview team did not excel at this. Often there was at least one other observer. Other team members would often speak up during the interview to ask additional questions if they felt the interviewer had failed to follow up sufficiently.

To counter the potential for an interviewer's own perceptions to influence answers, staff went through a week-long training session to provide a common understanding and approach. The training session covered the conceptual framework; reviewed available information on urban livelihoods; and trained them in qualitative techniques for interviewing and analysis. It stressed the need to record responses exactly and not answer the questions for respondents or interpret their answers when writing down responses.

In addition, staff conducted field trials to pretest procedures and survey instruments. Pretesting was very important for detecting a range of potential problems, from logistical glitches to problems with methods or threats to accuracy. Pretesting also revealed talents or problems among team members; for example, some were more adept at facilitation than others. Leaders could then reconfigure team responsibilities.

## Feasibility

*Are the procedures culturally sensitive, politically viable, affordable, and not overly burdensome?* Respect for local perspectives, rhythms, and culture is essential. The potential for political interference, crime, and the threat of physical violence to both team members and respondents is also generally a greater problem in urban than in rural areas. In one site in Bangladesh, women threatened team members and refused to let them leave, apparently under orders from the local strongman.

"Rapid" does not mean "cheap." Although rapid assessments may be less costly than long-term research projects, quality assessments still require substantial time and resources. Assessments can involve months of preparation, including designing, training, and securing logistical support

and outside expertise. In addition, cities present some unique logistical challenges. For example, urban areas are usually compact, with few open spaces for interviews.

Demands on people's time affect team members as well as community residents. In rural assessments, survey teams usually are away from their homes and able to focus intensively on the assessment. In urban assessments, team members may conduct the surveys in their home city, where demands from work and family can pull them away.

*Responses.* Partnering with trusted local organizations can minimize obstacles to feasibility. CBOs, NGOs, and local government officials know the area and can provide protection from crime; they can help to get the unit of analysis right, such as by identifying especially vulnerable and poor neighborhoods; and they can improve the assessment's reliability, such as by helping to select a cross-section of the community for interviews. CBOs can also identify any "hidden" vulnerable groups, like street children or elderly people who live alone. By working with local staff and organizations, CARE gained credibility with the community and ensured that its procedures were culturally appropriate.

Still, these assessments were not meant to replace more in-depth ethnographic reviews or rigorous statistical surveys. The questions were general inquiries into community history, services, and livelihoods. Consequently, the questionnaires were quite similar in both Tanzania and Bangladesh and did not require significant cultural adjustment. Interviewers familiar with local conditions, such as types of savings groups or housing materials, made necessary modifications in the course of the interviews.

Politically, the city can be more complex than rural areas. In Bangladesh, even within the same community, it was often necessary to contact different neighborhood leaders to obtain their support. In Tanzania, CARE made initial contact with residents through the political structures. Permission to conduct the assessment was always granted, but CARE had to be especially careful to make the purpose of the assessment clear and to keep local leaders informed.

Safety was a priority, especially since many interviews took place in the evening. First, CARE would explore its concerns with CBOs working in the area and secure the approval of local political leaders, which provided an aura of protection. Meetings were held in publicly visible spots, with groups of residents and with never less than two interviewers. CARE vehicles transported interviewers to and from the interview site. In Tanzania, where neighborhoods were too dangerous to conduct interviews after dark, interview times were moved up so that most were completed by day's end.

When compared to rural rapid assessment procedures, the cost of urban rapid assessments may be less because transport distances are shorter between neighborhoods and, when staff live in the city, the organization may not have to pay lodging. CARE Bangladesh's choice of two cities outside the Dhaka area, however, meant that it had to transport all those involved (study teams and logistic support staff) to each city and pay daily expenses and air transport for everyone.

CARE Tanzania paid honoraria to those participants who were not CARE employees.

Still, the assessments seemed to put relatively more strain on a country office's human and physical resources than its financial ones. Although not cheap, with some financial assistance from headquarters, the country offices managed to finance the assessments. The quantitative survey was also relatively inexpensive, aided in Bangladesh by the straightforward and fairly simple sampling strategy.

On the other hand, the assessments required a long-term (a month or so) time commitment of a large number of staff who normally worked on other projects and who still had those other commitments. The assessment also made intensive demands on secretarial time and office equipment, including photocopiers, computers, and printers, which were not always working or available. Good planning can minimize these problems. An organization can reduce demands on staff's time by, as in Tanzania, contracting with outside firms for some work and supplementing their own staff with individuals from stakeholder or other interested groups.

Interviews were typically scheduled in places where community members might meet, including schoolrooms and community meeting halls. These rooms provided a comfortable, safe place for the interviews, with less distraction than if the interviews were held in the open air. Because interviews tended to occur during the evening or late afternoon, teams also needed to ensure that lighting was available. Electric outages were common, so gas lamps were carried along for back-up.

Particularly after pretesting, but also during the assessment, daily feedback sessions smoothed operation. Team members discussed the content and organization of the questionnaires (including flow of the questionnaire and how well the questions communicated the desired meaning to respondents), how to manage the interview process (ensuring participation or keeping the interview on track, for example), and how to deal with logistical issues (lack of lighting, for instance). Teams implemented solutions at the next interview session.

## Utility

*Are the results useful?* The measures suggested here may improve assessment methods, but do the assessments themselves make any difference to programs? Beebe (2001) and Leurs (1997) comment that there are few examples of the usefulness of rapid assessments. We find that for the results of the assessment to be useful, they must be credible, timely, and respond to a demand for information.

*Responses.* To understand the demand for information, CARE consulted with government officials, donors, and researchers as well as project staff to uncover key urban issues in both Bangladesh and Tanzania. In Dar es Salaam, findings were shared just days after initial analyses were completed with local partners, government officials, and aid organizations. Participation by partners in the assessment plausibly

increased their sense of ownership of the information, heightening the possibility that they would use the findings in their own organizations.

In Tanzania, CARE distributed the final assessment report to donors, NGOs, and other key partners. The assessment led to increasing recognition of CARE as an organization with expertise in urban issues. CARE and the Dar es Salaam City Commission later used the survey results to design a project that used water supply problems as a departure point for other neighborhood-based activities.

In Bangladesh, staff used assessment results to prepare a project proposal. The proposal was funded, and long-term development activities in infrastructure, credit, health and nutrition, and community governance are underway in four cities. The assessment experience did not incorporate potential partners, and dissemination was limited. This appears to be because CARE Bangladesh was not looking to establish credibility with donor organizations or link with new partners. (At this time, CARE Bangladesh did not usually partner with local organizations at the proposal stage.) The principal use of the assessment was to prepare a proposal for a previously identified funding window. In contrast, in Tanzania, CARE did not have a specific funder lined up. It wanted to use the results as a marketing tool and cast its net widely to include potential partners and alert potential donors to its efforts.

Both offices, however, lacked a developed culture of information use. There is little evidence that staff in either office saw the results as a foundation for a data bank, which they could mine later for additional insights, or as part of a larger, iterative process. Although difficult given their focus on meeting daily operational demands, individual country offices have now begun to stress institutional learning processes more than before.

## Propriety

*Are methods ethical and fair?* Ethically, researchers must inform respondents of how the information will be used and any risks the study presents to them. With unequal power relations between those conducting the study and those being interviewed, respondents may feel obliged to participate. Although a more extractive study may not be unethical, it seems more just, and more effective, to use a participatory approach that involves community residents and shares findings with them. This encourages ownership and utilization of the information.

*Responses.* Facilitators always started qualitative interviews by reading a statement to make clear that the purpose of the assessment was to gather information about the community, not to plan a project in the community. They also made clear that the individual or community would not receive any compensation for participation in the assessment. Although the quantitative survey did not involve any invasive procedures, enumerators secured consent from each individual before conducting the interview as well.

Debates arise over the propriety of compensation, but here assessment leaders decided that cultural norms of hospitality dictated a need to show appreciation to participants. In Bangladesh, participants received a meal packet. In Tanzania, participants had a small break with soft drinks. This appreciation seems particularly appropriate in cases, such as these, where the process is primarily extractive, the participants were specifically invited for the session, and there is no assurance of a future project to benefit the community.

### Improving Overall Accuracy

*Triangulation and quantitative-qualitative methods.* In diverse, complex urban environments, interviews with one group or a few households may provide a misleading impression of urban constraints and conditions. Triangulation is essential to accuracy.

These assessments used a number of information sources, each with some overlap (Figure 1). A review of secondary data provided a starting point. By comparing information from the different sources of qualitative information, team members could see if they told a consistent story and could follow up on any discrepancies. Although quantitative surveys are not usually considered part of the rapid assessment toolkit, with planning, results from quantitative surveys can be available for prior or joint analysis with qualitative results.

The complementarity of quantitative and qualitative methods provided another means of triangulation. The assessments used each method in light of its comparative strengths, and so using both qualitative and quantitative methods gave a more complete picture of the community than could either approach alone. The quantitative household surveys, statistically representative of each community, provided household-based data to enrich and compare with qualitative findings. The quantitative surveys focused on prevalence or severity of a situation, such as how many houses had latrines or how many children were malnourished. These surveys included questions on household demographics, employment, housing, health, and food and nutrition security. They also included a food frequency questionnaire and anthropometric measurements for children under five.

The qualitative surveys highlighted the strategies, perceptions, behaviors, motivations, and priorities of the residents, or specific groups of residents, and their explanations for the causes of their problems. Figures from the household survey checked information from the qualitative interview, and the qualitative survey illuminated quantitative answers. Use of both allowed confirmation of communitywide perceptions, explanation of statistical findings, or identification of areas for further study, especially when the results seemed contradictory. For example, was it true that only boys go to school and girls stay home and work? (In Tanzania, the quantitative survey showed girls actually had higher attendance rates than boys up to adolescence, as boys were taken out of school to work at an early age.) Why did many people fear

eviction although they owned their home? (In qualitative interviews in Bangladesh, residents noted they owned their house but not the land on which it sat.) In Bangladesh, repeating patterns from other countries, mothers did not seem particularly concerned about malnutrition, yet child stunting (low height-for-age) was critically high, indicating chronic deprivation and high probabilities of damage to physical and cognitive development. A quantitative survey revealed this fact in a way that a ranking exercise of community problems would not.

Some researchers warn that a local situation must be “fully understood” before use of a quantitative questionnaire. But staff often need answers to some questions—household size, nutritional status, housing materials—that require little interpretation and are best answered with a quantitative survey. The exact nature and timing of use of the different methods depends on the task at hand, although they are often most useful when applied iteratively.

### Conclusions

Failing to heed methodological criticisms of rapid assessment processes can lead to poor quality appraisals that may then discredit the approach (Beebe 2001). This paper suggests a number of ways to respond to these concerns while respecting the fundamental nature and aims of a rapid assessment (See Table 1). The paper draws its conclusions by comparing urban assessment experiences in Bangladesh and Tanzania against widely held research standards and suggesting ways to meet the challenges of carrying out assessments in urban areas.

Because of the multilayered challenges to credibility, we find that strengthening processes in response to one methodological concern often answers the challenge posed by another. For example, strengthening local partnerships not only improves utility but also addresses issues surrounding construct validity, propriety, and feasibility. Because the sections above detail potential responses to specific criticisms, we will not repeat them here (See Table 1). But because of the interrelated effects of actions, we can highlight some general conclusions.

First, planning of the assessment is essential to success. Users of rapid assessment methods should be clear about their objectives, the choice of tools and strategies to reach those objectives, and the methodological limits of those tools. A solid conceptual framework should guide action and underpin analysis. A conceptual framework helps users focus on information requirements (we want to learn what about whom?), the most appropriate tools, their limitations, and ways to overcome them, often through triangulation.

Accuracy and reliability largely depend on understanding the context, drawing the appropriate sample, and interpreting findings correctly. Working with local partners, including government authorities, can illuminate context and ease logistics. Rules of sampling can guide selection of individuals to interview, even for qualitative work. (Given the complexity and heterogeneity of urban lives, selecting

**Table 1. Urban Rapid Assessments: Methodological Challenges and Responses**

Criteria	Major Challenges	Responses
Context Validity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• account for:               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• effects of political and economic environment</li> <li>• diversity of social networks</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• highlight these conditions in conceptual framework and training</li> <li>• exploit secondary data</li> <li>• work with local partners</li> </ul>
Construct Validity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• understand unfamiliar urban conditions</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• work with local partners (NGOs, aid agencies, officials)</li> <li>• create teams possessing diverse skills and knowledge, varying in age, gender, ethnicity</li> <li>• support conclusions with data</li> <li>• present findings to teams and other outsiders</li> <li>• review secondary data</li> <li>• describe urban conditions in training</li> </ul>
Measurement Validity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• choose appropriate population for analysis</li> <li>• interview appropriate respondent</li> <li>• make questions understandable</li> <li>• deal with sensitive topics</li> <li>• account for potential bias in answers</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• define boundaries for “the city,” neighborhood, or group of interest according to study needs and community perception</li> <li>• identify subgroups within the overall population needing special study</li> <li>• select individual most likely to know about the topic as respondent</li> <li>• conduct interviews in morning, evening, days off</li> <li>• translate and back-translate questionnaire into local language</li> <li>• use locally familiar terminology</li> <li>• ask questions about community history and services in key-informant or large-group interviews</li> <li>• ask non-individual-specific questions about crime, illegal activities, and sexual disease in large-group and focus-group interviews</li> <li>• if commonly accepted, ask questions about livelihoods earned from illegal activities in focus groups</li> <li>• identify and conduct separate interviews with influentials</li> <li>• standardize questionnaire for ease of use by those with limited experience</li> <li>• work with local partners to adapt approach to residents’ lifestyles, customs, beliefs</li> <li>• have trusted local partners introduce the study and interview teams</li> <li>• verify responses through multiple methods (tools, levels of analysis)</li> </ul>
External Validity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• account for:               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• mobility of households</li> <li>• rapidity of change in urban areas</li> <li>• diversity on different dimensions of livelihood</li> <li>• need for generalizability</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• determine needed level of representativeness (city? slum? occupational or ethnic group?)</li> <li>• respect limits of analysis</li> <li>• identify key factors that could cause sample to differ from population of interest</li> <li>• select sample to represent the range of these factors</li> <li>• compare findings with secondary data</li> </ul>

**Table 1. (Con'd.)**

Criteria	Major Challenges	Responses
Reliability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• ensure:               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• needed level of representativeness</li> <li>• tools and methods are appropriate</li> <li>• personnel possess required level of ability</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• actively select respondents using appropriate sampling methods</li> <li>• work with local partners to select respondents</li> <li>• tie tools and methods to objectives and data needed to be collected</li> <li>• train staff intensively</li> <li>• standardize questionnaire</li> <li>• field-test data collection process and instruments</li> <li>• encourage team support and feedback</li> <li>• verify responses through multiple methods</li> </ul>
Feasibility	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• respect local perspectives, rhythms, and culture</li> <li>• deal with political interference and influence</li> <li>• protect teams and respondents from violence and crime</li> <li>• maintain reasonable cost</li> <li>• find appropriate spaces for interviews</li> <li>• keep teams intact</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• work with local partners and local authorities to deal effectively with local concerns, crime, and violence</li> <li>• deal with potential for violence:               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• alert local authorities</li> <li>• interview in publicly visible areas</li> <li>• go in teams of two or more, accompanied by local partners</li> <li>• transport staff to and from areas</li> <li>• interview only at “safe times”</li> </ul> </li> <li>• train staff to make on-the-spot cultural and logistical adjustments</li> <li>• resist making a rapid assessment into an in-depth research study</li> <li>• plan to account for strain on human and physical, and not only financial, resources (identify sources of funding and personnel, utilize consultants, incorporate staff from other stakeholders)</li> <li>• hold interviews in comfortable, safe places with provisions for lighting</li> <li>• hold daily feedback sessions on logistics, study process, interaction with community</li> </ul>
Utility	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• produce credible, timely results</li> <li>• respond to demand for information</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• consult with stakeholders and project staff prior to survey design</li> <li>• identify how to use results within organization prior to survey</li> <li>• allow partners to participate in design, data collection, and analysis</li> <li>• identify potential users of information—and identify and implement means to share results with them</li> <li>• develop staff abilities to demand and use information and to implement data banks and institutional-learning processes</li> </ul>
Propriety	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• inform respondents of purpose of study and risks to them</li> <li>• secure consent of respondents</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• conduct survey in accord with accepted norms of research ethics</li> <li>• read a prepared statement in understandable language stating:               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• purpose of study</li> <li>• means of selection</li> <li>• compensation to be given</li> <li>• risk to respondents</li> </ul> </li> <li>• secure written or verified oral consent</li> <li>• compensate appropriately</li> </ul>

individuals is usually a better idea than simply taking a convenience sample). Those who conduct the interviews should be well-trained to help them understand context and to use the tools well.

Training sessions that emphasize conceptual as well as practical matters are essential, as is intensive pretesting, which gives insights into how well the approaches and the teams work in the field. Assessment leaders can adapt tools so interviewers with limited experience can still collect reliable information. Verifying information by collecting data from various sources in various ways is essential to ensuring its reliability. Discussion of data and findings among teams is another useful check.

While these are general considerations about method, CARE had to adapt its methods to specific constraints of urban areas, especially in terms of participant availability, presence of local authorities, physical security, and logistics. Urban assessments attempting to profile a community will likely need to conduct interviews in the early morning, the evening, or on days off. Teams may even have to schedule household appointments. Teams will also have to inform and usually gain approval of local authorities. Teams can minimize the potential influence of local authorities by separating them or their representatives from the actual interviews. Teams can gain significant help with entering the community, logistics, and protection by working with local authorities. Providing information to these influential individuals not only keeps them informed but can energize them to action.

Whereas anthropologists may cast doubt on the validity of results from such a short-term exercise and consider findings superficial or otherwise problematic (Campbell 2001; Leurs 1997), economists are likely to be skeptical because standard sampling procedures are not used to produce hard numbers. But these perspectives miss the aims of the rapid assessment processes and fail to acknowledge how rapid assessments contend with these criticisms. Reliability increases from triangulation and use of quantitative and qualitative methods. Our work highlighted the constraints of qualitative or quantitative methods alone and each one's potential for misleading results. It also emphasized the need for different sources of information, different points of view, and team discussion. One important conclusion is that the kinds of assessments described here should be initiating events: they should not try to do the heavy lifting of in-depth ethnographic or economic studies. They are initial forays into a community to get a reliable overview of conditions and livelihood strategies.

Even with triangulation, some approaches seem more suited to collection of some kinds of information than others. Key informants sometimes have limited knowledge or are biased. This is unsurprising, as assessments generally conduct only a few key-informant interviews and ask "the most knowledgeable people," who are themselves often part of the elite. Key-informant interviews, however, provide useful background information that the interviewer can use to kick off group discussion or validate in group discussion.

Large groups added more voices to the description, especially in terms of communitywide characteristics, such as community history, ethnic composition, economic base, and facilities. The focus groups were less informative at the community level, principally because they just confirmed information gathered in large groups. But they could explain findings from other data sources or provide specific information about prevalence of certain conditions, such as threats of violence from unemployed youth or coping strategies such as prostitution. Still, these groups were not sufficient to provide reliable statistics for the community as a whole. This was not only because of the small numbers but also because the focus groups were not representative of the community at-large. And, as focus groups, they were not meant to be.

These experiences suggest that the principal challenges to the validity of rapid assessments used for exploratory purposes in urban areas can be met through use of appropriate, often representative, samples; use of both qualitative and quantitative approaches; incorporation of team members with a variety of perspectives, knowledge areas, and professions; emphasis on team interaction; and linkages with local organizations and community members familiar with the economic, political, social, and cultural context of the city. Interestingly, many of the approaches, methods, and tools are similar to those used in rural assessments. This is, perhaps, not surprising. In basic terms, researchers' tools work across a range of conditions, both urban and rural. The challenge is to be alert to how specific urban conditions will affect these tools, techniques, and approaches, and how to deal with or take advantage of them.

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup>Variations on this list exist. For example, Marsland and others (2001) cite four tests of "trustworthiness" of any investigative method. Conventional scientific research, they note, worries about internal validity, external validity, reliability, and objectivity. Participatory field research uses parallel terms of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. The terms used by Harris, Jerome, and Fawcett (1997), drawn from evaluation standards developed in the field of education (Joint Committee on Standards for Education Evaluation 1994), encompass these and other important concepts valid for research in developed—or developing—countries.

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