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COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF MERGING OF KNOWLEDGE RESEARCH METHODOLOGY IN FIGHTING POVERTY: INSIGHTS FROM TANZANIA

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Abstract

One significant challenge in developing effective strategies to fight poverty is understanding the methodologies and knowledge required for such efforts. This study compares the merging of knowledge research methodology with traditional and participatory approaches in co-creating knowledge. It begins by contrasting traditional and participatory methods, then examines how the merging of knowledge differs from other participatory methodologies. A key focus is on employing a methodology that enhances engagement among individuals with lived experience of poverty, academics, and practitioners within and beyond the research context. This engagement is essential for co-creating scientific knowledge that can liberate those living in poverty. The study found that while all research approaches exhibit varying degrees of participation, the merging of knowledge stands out as a distinctive approach. It promotes empowerment, achieves sustainable transformative effects, challenges power imbalances, fosters inclusivity, and enhances participant engagement in knowledge co-creation. This is particularly significant for individuals living in poverty. The findings align with Wresinski's assertion that research on poverty must involve those living in poverty; otherwise, it 'enslaves them' and remains 'lifeless'. The study concludes that employing a merging of knowledge methodology enriches the knowledge base and empowers those affected by poverty. By prioritizing diverse voices, regardless of their societal power, this approach fosters a more inclusive and effective research environment. Therefore, this study advocates for the adoption of a merging of knowledge approach to address the limitations of traditional and participatory approaches to poverty research.

Keywords: Poverty, merging of knowledge, participatory approaches, scientific knowledge, experiential knowledge of people with lived experience of poverty.

INTRODUCTION

The first Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) aims to "*End poverty in all its forms everywhere*" (United Nations, 2019). Its seven associated targets include eradicating extreme poverty for at least half the population of men, women, and children of all ages living in poverty (United Nations, 2019). At the Millennium Summit in September 2000, 189 countries adopted the Millennium Declaration, pledging to "*spare no effort to free our fellow men, women, and children from the abject and dehumanizing conditions of extreme poverty*" (United Nations, 2022). This commitment has lifted over one billion people out of extreme

poverty, reduced hunger, and enabled more girls to attend school than ever before.

Despite these gains, nearly 700 million people worldwide still live in extreme poverty, subsisting on less than $2.15 per day (World Bank, 2024). Over half of these individuals reside in Sub-Saharan Africa. At current progress rates, the world is unlikely to meet the goal of ending extreme poverty by 2030, with estimates suggesting around 600 million people will still be struggling in extreme poverty by then (World Bank, 2023). Extreme poverty is concentrated in regions where eradication efforts face significant challenges, including parts of Sub-Saharan Africa, conflict-affected areas, and remote rural locations. The SDGs Goals Report 2023 highlights that the climate crisis, the war in Ukraine, a weak global economy, and the lingering effects of the COVID-19 pandemic have hindered the achievement of these goals (United Nations, 2023).

In Tanzania, poverty continues to pose a significant challenge for millions. The 2017/18 Tanzania Household Budget Survey revealed that 26.4 percent, or approximately 16 million out of 61 million people, live in poverty. This is defined as individuals unable to meet their basic needs due to earnings below the national poverty line of TZS 49,320 per adult per month (World Bank, 2018; MoFP & NBS, 2019). Furthermore, the World Bank (2021) reported that four out of five individuals living below the international poverty line are in rural areas, underscoring the rural-urban disparity. Poverty encompasses multiple dimensions, including both visible and hidden aspects that are interconnected (United Nations, 2024). Additionally, Tanzania grapples with challenges such as corruption, embezzlement, and mismanagement of resources (The Guardian, 2010), along with social and institutional maltreatment (United Nations, 2024). If these issues remain unaddressed, they could hinder poverty reduction efforts in the future (Wetengere, 2024).

A critical challenge in combating poverty is identifying "*the type of knowledge needed to fight it*" (Wresinski, 1980). For many years, researchers and policymakers believed that academic knowledge was superior to other forms, such as the experiential knowledge of practitioners and those with lived experience of poverty. However, both academics and practitioners often report on the conditions of people living in poverty from an external perspective (Osinski, 2021). Seebohm Rowntree (1908), as cited in Bray et al. (2020), noted that researchers assess poverty based on observable facets, rendering "verbal evidence superfluous." Consequently, individuals living in poverty have not always participated in research aimed at understanding and influencing their circumstances (Osinski, 2021). Wresinski (1980) argues that research on poverty that excludes these individuals "enslaves them" and remains "lifeless."

In response to these challenges, in 2016, the International Movement All Together in Dignity (ATD) Fourth World, in collaboration with researchers from Oxford University, launched an international research project across six countries from the Global North and South to identify the dimensions of poverty and their interrelations (Bray et al., 2019; Osinski, 2021). The project included countries from the Global South, such as Bangladesh, Bolivia, and Tanzania, and from the Global North, including France, the United Kingdom, and the United States (Bray et al., 2019). The research methodology employed a Merging of Knowledge (MoK) approach, where academics, practitioners, and people in poverty participated as co-researchers.

This study aims to conduct a comparative analysis of the MoK research methodology in addressing poverty. Unlike traditional and other participatory research methodologies, MoK not only involves individuals with lived experiences of poverty but also actively engages them beyond the research context, treating them as equals. MoK challenges participants' insights while empowering them to question and engage with other forms of knowledge. This collaborative process fosters a nuanced understanding of the issues at hand, laying a solid foundation for knowledge generation and the development of effective policy responses.

PARTICIPATORY RESEARCH METHODOLOGIES ON POVERTY

Traditional vs participatory research approaches on poverty

Chambers (1994) defines "participation" as "an empowering process which enables people affected by a project, program or policy to do their analysis, to take command, to gain in confidence, and to make their own decisions." Participation should allow participants to effect change in the definition and/or outcome of the project or policy (UNHR and ATD, 2024). Instances in which people living in poverty do not see their input in participatory processes reflected in the final end-product can lead to suspicion about the purpose of their inclusion or of the related institution itself. Further, the inability or unwillingness to incorporate those contributions can negatively impact the future relationship between the different stakeholders.

The inclusion of people with a direct experience of poverty in research in a participatory way began seriously with movements such as action research and community-based participatory research (CBPR), inspired by thinkers such as Paolo Freire and Orlando Fals Borda (Osinski, 2021). Therefore, involving people living in poverty in research for purposes beyond data collection, "as a process by which communities can work towards change," represented a turn in how people living in poverty were viewed in the research process (Osinski, 2021). People living in poverty were no longer seen merely as objects (means) of research but as subjects (ends) who were able to reflect, act upon those reflections, and have the potential to be conscious of their situation in society (Freire, 1970). Friedman *et al.* (2024) indicated that the inclusion of people with lived experience of poverty as co-researchers is not only essential in action research but is in itself a step towards transforming, or potentially transforming, the field.

In response to growing criticism of traditional methods of research, such as surveys and field visits, in the 1980s, Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) developed Rapid Rural Appraisals (RRAs) and Participatory Rural Appraisals (PRAs) (Chambers, 2007). The emergence of participatory poverty research shows a growing interest among researchers and policymakers in incorporating the 'voices of the poor' in research that concerns them (Osinski, 2021). The participatory approaches sought to include the knowledge and experience of people living in poverty and actively involve them in developing and managing development programs (Freire, 1970). In 1992, the World Bank introduced "Participatory Poverty Assessments" (PPAs), which, like PRAs, marked a shift from the traditional way of collecting information about people with lived experience of poverty as *objects of inquiry* (Osinski, 2021). PPAs seek to "understand the experience and causes of poverty from the perspective of the poor themselves," similar to anthropological approaches (Robb, 2002).

While some approaches were inclusive, they used a consultative research approach (Osinski, 2021). Arnstein (1969) points out that the consultative research methodology invites people's opinions through surveys, neighborhood meetings, and public hearings without any assurance that the people's concerns and ideas will be considered. In a situation where powerholders restrict the contribution of people with lived experience of poverty solely to this level, participation remains just a window-dressing ritual. In that way, people in poverty are primarily perceived as statistical abstractions, and participation is measured by how many come to meetings, take brochures home, or answer a questionnaire. What people in poverty achieve in these activities is that they have 'participated in participation'. What powerholders achieve is evidence that they have gone through the required processes of involving people living in poverty.

A major challenge is that these approaches did not involve people with lived experience of poverty from the beginning of the programs to the end. The methodological guide included a list of pre-framed questions to be asked. The [1] (actions, activities, or interventions), control, or power. The ladder represents a continuum of power that ascends from *non-participation* (no agency) to *degrees of participation* (increasing levels of agency) (Hart, 1992).

Arnstein (1969) describes participation as an act of acquiring power. Without an authentic reallocation of power in the form of money or study teams approached individuals, groups, and communities using classical sociological tools such as interviews, focus groups, and more novel participatory methods (Osinski, 2021). Yet, achieving the SDG goals related to eradicating poverty relies on finding practical ways to engage people with lived experience of living poverty and those working to address it at all levels as equals in study design, governance, operation, analysis, and dissemination (Patrick, 2019). This is in line with ATD FW (Undated), which asserts that a prerequisite in the fight against poverty and social exclusion is recognizing people with lived experience of poverty as actors in their own right.

The degree of engagement of participants

The defining characteristic of participatory research is not so much with the methods and techniques employed, but the '*degree of engagement'* of participants within and beyond the research encounter" (Pain and Francis, 2003). Hart's (1992) typology of participation is presented as a metaphorical "ladder," with each ascending stair representing increasing levels of individual agency

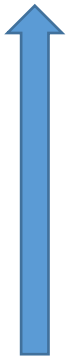
decision-making authority, participation merely "allows the powerholders to claim that all sides were considered, but makes it possible for only some of those sides to benefit. It simply maintains the status quo". In addition, participation is "the redistribution of power that enables the have-not, presently excluded from the political and economic processes, to be deliberately included in the future. It is a strategy by which the have-nots join in

[1] In research, "agency" refers to the capacity of individuals or groups to make choices, exert influence, and actively participate in shaping their own lives and circumstances, essentially highlighting the power of individuals to act and contribute to their own reality within a given social structure; it emphasizes the active role of participants rather than viewing them as passive subjects (Oxford Review, n.d.).

determining how information is shared, goals and policies are set, tax resources are allocated, programs are operated, and benefits like contracts and patronage are parceled out. In short, it is how they can induce significant social reform, which enables them to share in the benefits of the affluent society…. participation without redistribution of power is an empty and frustrating process for the powerless."

Godrie (2017) proposes one level of no participation and three levels of participation. The no-participation level is at the bottom of the ladder (Table 1), where people in poverty do not understand the issues motivating a participatory process or their role in that process and are often misled into believing that they are being given power in a research process that has been intentionally manufactured to deny them power. In Arnstein's words: "In the name of persons in poverty participation, people are placed on rubber-stamp advisory committees or advisory boards for the express purpose of 'educating' them or engineering their support. Instead of genuine participation, the bottom level of the ladder signifies powerholders' distortion of participation into a public relations vehicle" (Arnstein,1969).

Table 1: The ladder of the degree/level of participation

Ladder	Degree/Levels of Participation	Stance Toward Community	Impact
	Control	Defer to	Community ownership: Democratic participation and equity through community-driven decision-making is fostered.
	Collaboration	Collaborate	Delegated power: The community's capacity to play a leadership role in implementing decisions is ensured.
	Consultation	Involve	Voice: Community needs and assets are integrated into the process.
		Consult	Tokenization: Input from the community is gathered.
	No Participation	Inform	Placation: The community is provided with relevant information.
		Manipulate	Marginalization: Access to the decision-making process is denied.

Source: Godrie (2017) and Arnstein (1969)

The three levels of participation are consultation, collaboration, and control (Table 1). At the *consultation* level, stakeholders are informed through a one-way flow of information without the power of negotiation, and their views are collected, but there is no assurance that people's concerns and ideas will be considered in the research process (Arnstein, 1969; Godrie, 2017). This level closely resembles extractive research approaches (Wilmsen, 2008), of which common methodological tools include surveys, interviews, and participatory observation. The person surveyed - the interviewee - retains no control over how and whether their views or inputs will be used in research. In such circumstances, interviewees may exhibit little to no commitment to the research. I recall an instance when I was about to leave a village where I had been conducting interviews. A farmer, who was my first interviewee and later assisted me in identifying additional households for interview, revealed that all the information he had provided was fabricated.

When I asked him why he lied, he responded, '*Because I did not know or trust you, nor did I understand what you needed my data for. Some of my information is very personal and shameful.*' This revelation led me to question how much of the information I had collected might also have been misleading for similar reasons.

In *collaborative* participation, research objectives are defined collectively (Godrie, 2017), and stakeholders are involved in various steps of the research process, particularly in the initial phases; however, they are less frequently involved in data analysis or interpretation or the diffusion of results (Osinski, 2021). In Arnstein's words: "At this rung of the ladder, power is redistributed through negotiation between people in poverty and powerholders. Finally, participation as control occurs, in Arnstein's words, when "participants or residents can govern a program or an institution, be in full charge of policy and managerial aspects, and be able to negotiate the conditions under which 'outsiders' may change them." (Arnstein, 1969). In other words, the research is both initiated and led by the stakeholders independently or in collaboration with researchers (Godrie, 2017). At the control level, for instance, public funding would flow directly to a community organization, and that organization would have full control over how that funding is allocated (Arnstein, 1969). In that way, people living in poverty can design a project, conduct research and analysis, write a paper, and disseminate information (Wetengere *et al*., 2024).

MERGING OF KNOWLEDGE APPROACH ON POVERTY RESEARCH

What knowledge?

Researchers and policymakers have long struggled with a fundamental question: "*What type of knowledge is needed to fight poverty?*" (Wresinski, 1980). To address this, several forms of knowledge have been identified: Experiential knowledge, gained from individuals with lived experiences of poverty; practitioners' knowledge, derived from professionals actively working in the field; academic knowledge, developed by scholars and researchers in universities; policymakers' knowledge, held by government officials responsible for crafting policy; lay knowledge, contributed by the general public, including those without lived experience of poverty who influence governmental decisions and opinion leader knowledge, offered by journalists and social media influencers who claim to have valuable insights.

While incorporating a broader range of knowledge could enhance the relevance and applicability of findings, it complicates the process and increases costs. Therefore, this study focused on three primary types of knowledge: experiential knowledge from individuals with lived experience of poverty, academic knowledge from university scholars, and action-based knowledge from field practitioners. Surprisingly, researchers and policymakers often prioritize academic knowledge above all else. Universities are frequently viewed as the primary creators and custodians of knowledge, seen as reliable sources in addressing complex issues (Wresinski, 1980). This academic knowledge is esteemed for its methodological rigor and perceived objectivity, leading to an assumption of neutrality in tackling societal challenges.

However, while academic knowledge is important, it is often inadequate in the fight against poverty. Many researchers and policymakers have been disappointed when their findings fail to contribute to poverty eradication (Wresinski, 1980). This shortcoming arises from a lack of attention to

the fact that academic research tends to produce abstractions, images of reality viewed from the outside, and translated into general terms. Such abstractions often exclude the emotions and nuances that inspire action. Wresinski (2006) asserted that research on poverty that does not involve the voices of those living in it "enslaves" them. He urged researchers to contribute to knowledge that is genuinely useful for the liberation of people in poverty.

A key argument is that, in addition to academic knowledge, there is a pressing need to listen to the insights of people with firsthand experience of poverty and the societal structures that perpetuate it. Equally important is the knowledge of practitioners who engage with disadvantaged individuals daily (Courtney, Godinot, and Wodon, 2006). Comprehensive knowledge about poverty is essential to inform, explain, and inspire action. Academic research alone will never be more than one component; it serves primarily as an informational basis, which can be explanatory but ultimately lifeless (Wresinski, 1980). This lifelessness persists as long as the other two components of knowledge are absent. Therefore, we need a form of 'scientific knowledge' that integrates insights from academics, practitioners, and individuals in poverty. According to Wresinski, this is the type of knowledge that can genuinely liberate people living in poverty.

Despite progress in involving people living in poverty in co-generating knowledge, reaching the most marginalized members of society remains a challenge for NGOs, governments, and aid agencies tasked with designing and implementing poverty reduction programs (Shetty, 2006). Research indicates that assisting individuals living in poverty to escape their circumstances requires not only additional public resources and time but also a more comprehensive approach to development policy. Learning from people living in poverty about how they navigate multiple deprivations and what they perceive as necessary to combat extreme poverty is crucial. Additionally, cultural and behavioral factors, such as a lack of trust and fear between impoverished individuals and the broader society, further hinder the uptake of social services.

The lessons learned elsewhere have implications for grassroots organizations, local and national governments, and international financial institutions (Shetty, 2006). Addressing the needs of the extremely poor requires a long-term approach rather than one-time interventions. Efforts must focus on strengthening the capacity of individuals living in poverty to transform their lives and build consensus for a new social contract, where the extremely poor play a central role in reshaping the institutions governing decision-making and asset distribution. This necessitates a new type of relationship among external agents, including government officials, civil society volunteers, community organizers, and people living in poverty.

Moreover, there is a need to generate actionable knowledge that empowers the extremely poor to understand and change their circumstances. Ultimately, project design aimed at assisting the very poor should begin with a fundamental question: "*Will this project provide the poorest with opportunities to achieve greater autonomy and freedom, rather than perpetuating cycles of deprivation and dependency?*" (Shetty, 2006).

Merging of knowledge: an alternative to the participatory research approach

Merging of Knowledge (MoK) is a dynamic process that enables people in poverty to engage in dialogue on equal footing with academics and practitioners in co-generating knowledge about poverty and the societal

structures that perpetuate it (Wetengere et al., 2024). This method ensures that experiential knowledge from those living in poverty, academic knowledge from scholars, and action-based knowledge from practitioners are confronted, weighed, and explored collaboratively (UNHR & ATD, 2024). Wodon (2018) asserts that MoK fosters equality by facilitating dialogue between people living in poverty and key stakeholders, including academics, policymakers, business leaders, social workers, and educators.

MoK plays a vital role in fostering dialogue, which is often lacking in society. By uniting individuals from diverse backgrounds it facilitates genuine exchanges of ideas. The MoK methodology acknowledges historical injustices where marginalized voices have been silenced and seeks to rectify these imbalances. It emphasizes that public discourse and policy debates are often shaped by perceptions of poverty rather than the lived experiences of those enduring it (Walker, 2014).

This collaboration ensures that policy formation is informed by the perspectives of individuals experiencing poverty (Wetengere et al., 2024). The MoK research process disrupts traditional power hierarchies, offering an alternative platform for understanding and addressing poverty. It recognizes people living in poverty as experts in their situations, capable of analyzing and addressing relevant issues.

Knowledge from different peer groups varies; insights from individuals with lived experiences of poverty differ significantly from those based on professional expertise or academic study (CHR, 2012; Bray et al., 2020). Individuals with lived experience of poverty articulate what impacts their lives most deeply, while academics and practitioners understand poverty through external lenses (Wresinski, 1980). These differences reflect distinct experiences and interpretations of the surrounding world.

MERGING OF KNOWLEDGE RESEARCH PROCESS CONDUCTED IN TANZANIA

This study was conducted in Tanzania between 2016 and 2019, led by a Tanzania National Research Team (TNRT) comprising six people living in poverty, five practitioners, and two academics (one of whom is the author of this paper). This is the first time MoK was employed in Tanzania to investigate poverty, publish, and disseminate results (ATD Tanzania, 2019). The study comprised four main phases: Building the TNRT/socialization; outreach, recruitment, and consent of participants; preparatory engagement with participants; data collection, data analysis, report writing, and information dissemination.

Building the Tanzania Nation Research Team/the Socialization Phase (two months)

This phase was conducted for four months and involved two stages: (i). Identifying the Tanzania National Research Team (TNRT), and (ii). Empowering processes of the Merging of Knowledge methodology (ATD Tanzania, 2019; Wetengere *et al.*, 2022).

(i) Identifying the Tanzania National Research Team across the peer groups

Before identifiying the TNRT, two events took place: On 22 March 2017, a Research permit to conduct research was granted by the Tanzania Commission for Science and Technology (COSTECH), and on 20 April 2017, approval was given by the Oxford Central University Research Ethics Committee to Prof. Robert Walker to run with ATD FW the research project titled "*Determining the Dimensions of Poverty and How to Measure Them*." To get this approval, a 20-page form had to be filled together with a 30-page appendix comprising a lot of commitments, in particular, to comply with ethics standards, to provide the two names,

addresses, and phone numbers of all national coordinators per country, to train them and their TNRTs in ethic requirements, in particular, not to harm participants and to provide support when the research process may be painful and to require consent forms from all would-be participants in the project.

The ATD Tanzania leadership team was responsible for identifying the TNRT. The leadership team liaised with ATD associates working in villages/streets in Dar es Salaam to identify people in poverty, academics, and practitioners, and sought guidance from village/street leaders who knew their local communities (ATD Tanzania, 2019). For people in poverty, potential participants were visited by the leadership team at their homes or workplaces to verify whether they met the project criteria, to explain the research objectives and value of their participation, to invite them to peer focus group meetings, and to seek their consent (via a signature or thumbprint). Requirements for those in poverty included minimal assets and means of production, low income, illiteracy or low education, poor quality of dwelling, and inadequate occupational status. Participant groupings were formed to include diversity in gender and age. The same procedure was used to identify practitioners and academics based on their roles, particularly for people in poverty.

(ii) Empowering processes of MoK

Empowerment is a transformative process that enhances the capacity of participants or individuals to actively engage and contribute within their social structure. Rather than viewing them as passive subjects, empowerment recognizes individuals as proactive agents capable of effecting change (Oxford Review, n.d.). This process equips them to take control of their circumstances by challenging system barriers, articulating their perspectives, accessing vital resources, and participating in decision-making processes. Consequently, empowering participants is fundamental to the effectiveness of MoK processes.

After the TNRT was selected, a training series on MoK was conducted (Wetengere *et al.*, 2022). To start with, two members of the TNRT attended an international seminar held on 5-10 September 2016 in France. The workshop aimed to create a spirit of trust and sharing, build a common understanding of the MoK methodology, and enable each of the six National Research Teams to explain what they will do and how they will work in the first 6 months. Further, to explain what will be the role of the international coordination team and the scientific advisory panel. This was followed by a series of training held in Tanzania: training meetings of all participants were held every Thursday between 2016 and 2017, a training workshop on MoK was held on 5-7 January 2017 in Dar es Salaam, and again a 3-day workshop held on 8-10 February 2017 titled "Orientation and pre-testing of research tools". On 21 February 2017, in one of the weekly meeting sessions held at the ATD office, the TNRT selected the research tools considered relevant and user-friendly. These training meetings were held to ensure that confidence and trust were established among participants in the TNRT before proceeding, and to train the participants on the MoK approach.

During these trainings, participants were brought together to familiarize/socialize with each other. Socialization included a series of training on the '*dos* and *don'ts'* of MoK, eating meals together, staying in the same place or building, mingling in small groups, and sharing ideas and experiences during short breaks and evenings (ATD Tanzania, 2019). Such socialization was meant to build relationships, including a sense of commonality and ease in being part of the project. Such a foundation proved critical to the research because it enabled all actors to learn from each other, overcome fear, grow in trust and confidence, and recognize the specific contributions made

by each group to the knowledge-building process.

Outreach, information sharing, recruitment, and consent of participants

This phase was conducted for four months and involved three stages: (i). Outreach by visiting study areas, (ii). identifying participants, and (iii). sharing information, recruitment, and consent of participants.

(i) Outreach by visiting study areas

The Tanzanian study covered five zones, five regions (one region in each zone), and ten districts (two districts in each region), half of which were urban and half rural. Purposive sampling techniques were used to identify twenty representative villages and ten towns or areas within large cities, including Dar es Salaam and Dodoma, where participants were recruited (see Table 2).

Table 2: Selected study areas per zone, region, district, and village/street

Zone	Region	District	Village/Street
Coastal (Eastern)	Dar es Salaam	Kinondoni: urban	Kunduchi, Tandale, Kambangwa and Boko
		Ilala: urban	Kipawa and Ferry market
Central	Dodoma	Kondoa: rural	Keikei and Sambwa
		Bahi: rural	Igubule and Nk'home
Northern	Kilimanjaro	Moshi: urban	Mwereni
		Hai: rural	Mkarama
Southern	Njombe	Njombe: urban	Idundilanga and Kambarage
		Ludewa: rural	Mangalanyene and Luvuyo
Western	Kigoma	Kibondo: rural	Kibondo and Rusohoko
		Kigoma Ujiji: urban	Rubuga and Kibirizi
Total	**5**	**10**	**20**

Source: ATD Tanzania National Research Team - TNRT (2019)

(ii) Identifying participants

Following their visits to the villages, the TNRT members involved ATD associates working in the designated areas (refer to Table 3) to identify individuals living in poverty, as well as academics and practitioners. They consulted village leaders who had a deep understanding of their local communities (ATD Tanzania, 2019). To ensure participants met the project criteria, the TNRT visited potential candidates at their homes or workplaces for verification. The criteria for identifying individuals living in poverty included limited assets, inadequate means of production, low income and educational attainment, poor housing quality, and occupational status. Participants were organized into groups based on gender, age, and professional roles, with a particular focus on those experiencing poverty.

Table 3: Total number of participants and type of peer groups involved in the study

Categories of Peer Group	Number of Peer Groups	Sex		Total Number of Participants
		M	F	
People Experiencing Poverty				
(i). Working age from 18 to 60	18 (9 of women)	44	55	99
(ii). Elderly above 60 years old	7 (3 of women)	26	21	47
(iii). Young people between 16 & 18	1 mixed group	4	4	8
(iv). Children between 9 and 16	8 mixed groups	32	30	62
Sub-Total	**34**	**106**	**110**	**216**
People Not Living in Poverty				
(i). Social Welfare Practitioners	7 mixed groups	23	19	42
(ii). Academics from higher learning institutions	4 mixed groups	18	7	25
Sub-Total	**11**	**41**	**26**	**67**
Grand Total	**45**	**147**	**136**	**283**

Source: ATD, Tanzania National Research Team - TNRT (2019)

(iii) Sharing information, recruitment, and consent of participants

The TNRT shared information about the project with potential participants. They clearly articulated the research objectives and emphasized the significance of each individual's involvement in the study. By outlining the benefits of participating, the TNRT aimed to foster a sense of ownership and engagement among community members. To facilitate this process, the TNRT invited individuals to join peer focus group meetings, where they could contribute their insights and experiences. Furthermore, the team ensured that participants understood the importance of their consent, which was obtained through a signature or thumbprint, thereby respecting their autonomy and reinforcing the ethical standards of the research.

Preparatory engagement with participants

The TNRT ensured that all participants had a comprehensive understanding of the research objectives, procedures, and potential impacts, empowering them to make informed decisions about their involvement. They emphasized the necessity for participants to share their insights, fostering an environment of open communication and collaboration. By highlighting the significance of participant input in shaping the research implementation, the TNRT aimed to achieve more relevant and impactful findings.

Fostering an environment where all participants work as equals, characterized by confidence, trust, and freedom from fear, significantly enhances the overall effectiveness and impact of the project. This collaborative spirit is essential for achieving meaningful and sustainable outcomes.

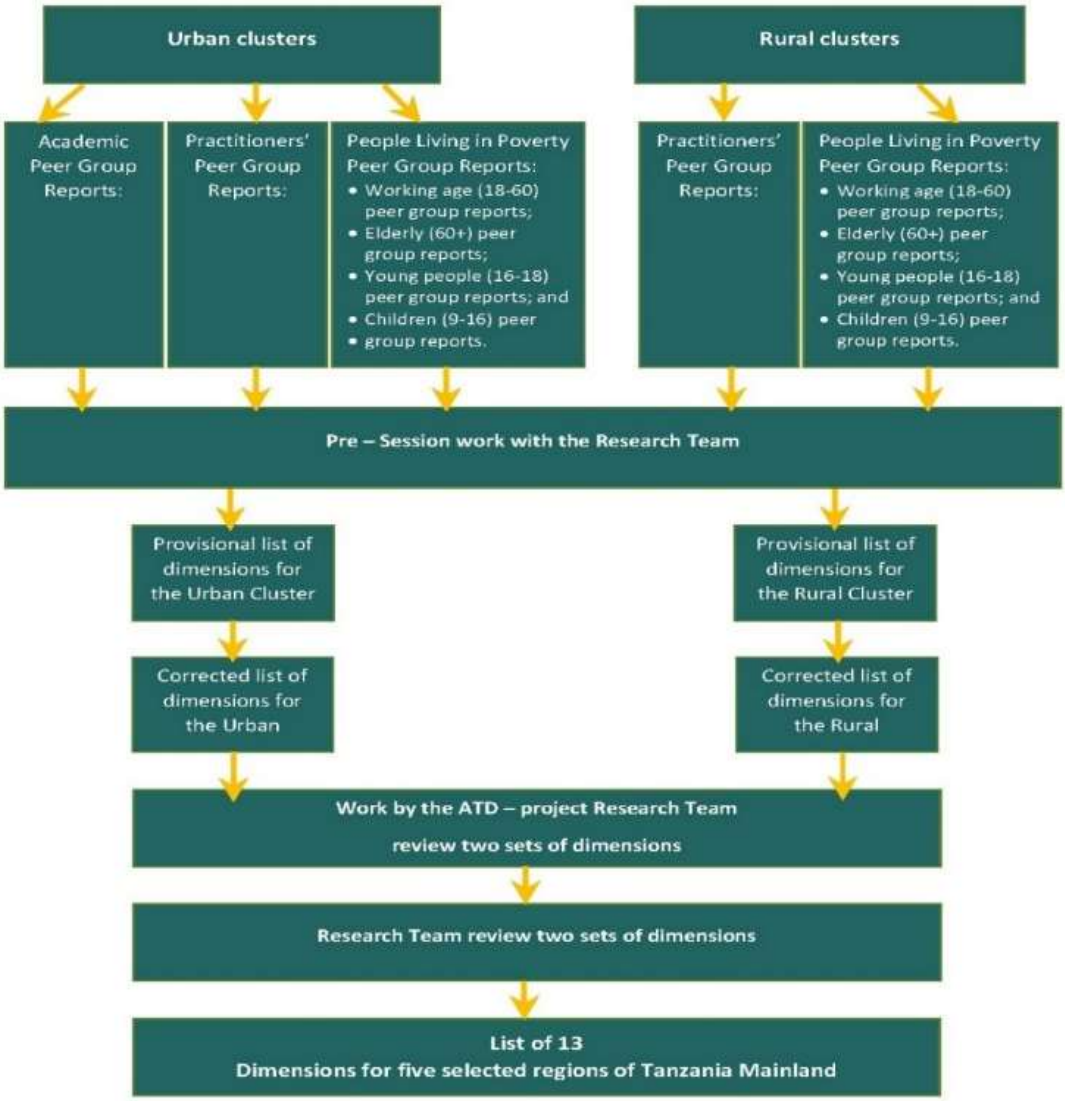
Engagement of peer groups for discussion (eighteen months)

Data collection

The MoK process was introduced during several meetings held for the data collection phase via a set of steps designed to facilitate self-expression and foster high-quality engagement among people who would not ordinarily converse to make joint decisions (ATD Tanzania, 2019; Wetengere *et al.*, 2024). A detail of each step in each place taken in Tanzania is given below. The approach used three 'peer' groups, namely: (i) people with lived experience of poverty, (ii) professional or

volunteer practitioners, including service providers, and (iii) academics to participate on an equity basis in the co-creation of knowledge (ATD Tanzania, 2019; Figure 1). Subsequent studies can incorporate other stakeholders like policy-makers, business leaders, people working in the media, and the general public (Loignon *et al.*, 2015).

Figure 1: The application of merging of knowledge research methodology to determine the dimensions of poverty across five selected regions of mainland Tanzania



The first step involved bringing seven to twelve participants from each category of peer groups to get to know one another and build confidence for individual and collective work (see Table 3 and Figure 2). Following this, each individual within the practitioners and academic peer groups was required to identify causes, consequences, and characteristics of poverty that they deemed important. This exercise took half to one day. For people with lived experience of poverty, the processes of self-actualization require a relatively safe space where they feel comfortable challenging one another and themselves (Skelton and Kalisa, 2017). This particular exercise lasted two to three days. TNRT members who had lived or

worked in communities affected by poverty consistently accompanied new participants living in poverty, acting as allies in addressing any barriers to communication, confidence, or self-worth throughout the research period. Co-researchers from the TNRT were trained to use these tools, such as body mapping, storytelling, photovoice, and drawings, to help participants living in poverty reflect on the daily realities of poverty and contribute their understanding of its characteristics.

Step two in the MoK process took place within the same peer groups, typically half-day sessions for practitioners and academics, while people living in poverty engaged in this process over two to three days. This stage involved individuals within each peer group sharing their thoughts, then compiling a comprehensive list of poverty attributes and organizing this list into clusters of closely related attributes to form dimensions of poverty for the village. Short reports were generated using verbal and audio recordings of each peer group's collaborative conclusions. TNRT members with direct experience of poverty then synthesized all the reports from peer groups comprising people living in poverty, highlighting recurring themes or issues. Practitioners and academics in the TNRT performed a similar synthesis for reports from their respective peer groups. All TNRT members incorporated insights from their field experiences to contextualize the descriptive data generated by the peer groups.

The third step involved two to three individuals from each peer group, representing both rural and urban villages in the same district, coming together to form new groups comprising people living in poverty, academics, and practitioners. People living in poverty met for two to three days to merge the dimensions of poverty separately for urban and rural villages within a district. For academics and practitioners, this process took half a day to one day. This step resulted in the formation of distinct dimensions of poverty for rural and urban areas based on inputs from different peer groups. Subsequently, the three peer groups compiled a comprehensive list of attributes of poverty and organized it into clusters of closely related attributes to create dimensions of poverty for rural and urban areas within the district.

The fourth step involved three to four representatives of peer groups from rural and urban areas from each district meeting with the TNRT to merge closely related dimensions and form national-level dimensions of poverty for rural and urban areas. Initially, sixty-seven dimensions of poverty were identified from five selected regions in Mainland Tanzania. The fifth and final MoK step involved the TNRT, along with three to four delegates from each peer group, collectively reviewing, critiquing, and merging the dimensions that are closely related. The results were combined to form a set of 13 dimensions for the five regions of Mainland Tanzania (ATD Tanzania, 2019). Of the 13 dimensions of poverty identified, three are traditional or commonly known, while ten are considered hidden dimensions.

Data analysis (three months)

Data analysis was not an isolated process; rather, it was an integral part of each step, facilitating the planning of subsequent stages. Each peer group created dimensions independently before merging them to form a comprehensive view. The TNRT meticulously cross-checked the reliability and validity of these dimensions to identify overlaps, contradictions, and inconsistencies. This validation process involved: cross-referencing with relevant peer groups, consulting secondary data, reviewing notes and transcriptions made by team members, and throughout the analysis, notes were taken to

highlight recurring issues identified across different peer groups and secondary data sources. Additionally, the TNRT shared their field experiences to document common challenges, thereby enriching the descriptive data collected from impoverished individuals.

The knowledge generated from the peer groups was 'merged' through analysis, discussion, and reflection within the TNRT. This collaborative effort resulted in an emergent list of rankings that was agreed upon by all groups. Following the final ranking, the TNRT conducted a thorough analysis of the outcomes from the peer groups. Members with direct experience of poverty critically evaluated whether their perspectives were accurately reflected in the final dimensions, while practitioners and academics performed similar assessments. These three syntheses were essential for the deliberations leading to the ranking of a unified list of poverty dimensions. The merging of ranked dimensions from each peer group exercise took place over one to two days. Subsequently, the team analyzed the new data generated during this event. The outcome of this process was not only a comprehensive list of ranked dimensions but also enriched insights into the realities of poverty, as experienced by different peer groups in each studied area.

Report writing (six months)

Although the academics took the lead in drafting the report, practitioners and individuals living in poverty were fully engaged in this stage of the process. The report was developed step by step, enabling all members of the TNRT to closely follow along. At each stage of writing, all peer groups within the TNRT participated in reviewing the content, ensuring that the report accurately reflected the research findings. Initially written in English, the report was subsequently translated into Kiswahili to facilitate understanding and feedback from Kiswahili-speaking members of the research team. It was particularly impressive to witness individuals living in poverty critically questioning certain information presented in the report.

In one instance, individuals living in poverty questioned the authorship of the report. In another case, they expressed concern over the absence of certain dimensions discussed within their peer groups that were not reflected in the final report, highlighting their lack of involvement in the process. This demonstrates that people living in poverty had some level of collaboration in the report's creation and were aware of its contents. For individuals living in poverty to have full control over the report, it would have required them to be co-writers alongside the academics. Several factors contributed to the lack of co-writing, including: time constraints due to project deadlines, limited proficiency in English, and disinterest in scholarly writing (Friedman et al., 2024). Upon further examination, it became evident that co-writing was not prioritized during the initial planning phases for funding and project duration. As a result, there was no training or empowerment provided in scholarly writing. Additionally, alternative media, such as verbal or visual formats, could have been utilized for co-writing.

Information dissemination (twelve months)

After the report was completed, all members of the Tanzania research team actively participated in disseminating the research findings. Notably, the narratives shared by individuals living in poverty were especially compelling, as they conveyed their personal life stories with authenticity and emotion.

MERGING OF KNOWLEDGE VERSUS OTHER PARTICIPATORY APPROACHES

Marshall's evaluation criteria for participatory approaches

Marshall *et al.* (2018) proposed four evaluation criteria that can be employed to distinguish non-participation from other participatory approaches (Table 4).

Table 4: Evaluation Criteria for Participatory Approaches

S/N	Evaluation Criteria	Evaluation Criteria Related to the Organization of the Research Process
1	Involvement and empowerment of persons experiencing poverty at all stages of the research process.	• *Participants had the power to define the research questions;* • *Participants had the power to analyze and synthesize data; and* • *Participants were involved in the publication and dissemination of results.*
2	Space is opened for poor and pro-poor groups to exercise greater agency.	• *Alliances of pro-poor groups were cultivated with local organizations.*
3	Power relations are recognized and/or challenged.	• *Power relations between participants are revealed and/or challenged through selected methodological tools and processes.*
4	Transformative knowledge about poverty is produced through the process.	• *The research produces transformative results, allowing for a reversal of injustices in the knowledge system.*

Sources: Marshall *et al.* (2018)

Using Marshall *et al.*'s four evaluation criteria, the study demonstrates that the merging of the knowledge approach met all the requirements/criteria.

Key Issues Distinguishing the Merging of Knowledge from Other Participatory Methodologies

The implementation of the merging of knowledge (MoK) methodology in poverty research in Tanzania has allowed us to differentiate it from traditional and other participatory methodologies. This differentiation not only clarifies the unique aspects of the MoK approach but also emphasizes its strengths in fostering inclusivity, empowerment, and sustainable transformation within the context of poverty research. The following issues highlight the advantages of the MoK methodology, demonstrating its superiority in addressing the multifaceted challenges of poverty:

Cross-socio-economic class or peer groups' acceptance

The MoK approach fundamentally prioritizes the acceptance of diverse socio-economic classes and statuses (people in poverty, practitioners, and academics), fostering a strong sense of social solidarity. This inclusivity encourages participants to collaborate on common goals, contrasting with other participatory methodologies that may inadvertently perpetuate or reinforce existing hierarchies. Similarly, UNHR and ATD (2024) differentiate the MoK from other participatory research methodologies by emphasizing its inclusivity and the concept of "deliberative triangulation." This refers to its capability to facilitate the exchange of reasons among

participants, aiming to resolve complex issues that necessitate interpersonal coordination and cooperation.

Empowerment of disempowered groups through training and human capital development

MoK places a strong emphasis on empowering marginalized groups through targeted training and capacity-building initiatives. These empowerment programs brought people together to familiarize each other, remove fear, and enhance trust and confidence among all participants. Through these programs, a slow transformation started to take place, and as a result, people living in poverty started to see themselves not as recipients of services but as actors who could speak their minds. Furthermore, empowerment programs dismantled the hierarchical barriers, creating a more balanced power relationship and enabling the voices of people in poverty to be heard, with their knowledge placed on equal footing with that of other actors.

Construction of social solidarity

MoK actively works towards building social solidarity by emphasizing shared experiences and collective goals. This commitment to community cohesion creates a sense of belonging among participants, differentiating it from methodologies that focus primarily on individual narratives.

Power imbalance recognized and challenged

The MoK process recognizes the inherent power imbalances among peer groups, particularly how wealth creates hierarchies that marginalize individuals living in poverty. These individuals often face silencing and shame. To ensure their voices are heard and valued, several "rules of the game" were established:

First, promoting empowerment programs: These initiatives included training sessions and opportunities for diverse groups to engage in discussions, share meals, and build relationships. By fostering trust and confidence, these programs alleviated fear among participants. This gradual transformation enabled individuals living in poverty to see themselves not just as recipients of services but as active contributors capable of expressing their thoughts. The empowerment programs dismantled hierarchical barriers, creating a more equitable power dynamic that allowed the voices of people living in poverty to be recognized alongside other stakeholders. Second, facilitating open dialogue: Participants were divided into distinct peer groups based on their backgrounds: individuals living in poverty, practitioners, and academics. This separation was crucial, as some individuals felt unable to speak freely, especially in mixed settings. For instance, individuals living in poverty often hesitate to share their insights in front of academics. Additionally, even within the same group, communication can be hindered by gender, age, and educational disparities. In Tanzania, for example, cultural norms may discourage women from speaking in front of men or children from voicing opinions before elders. By creating separate peer groups, we aimed to foster a more inclusive and comfortable environment for all participants.

Third, allowing time for reflection: Unlike academics and practitioners, individuals living in poverty often require more time to reflect on their experiences. While they may need 2-3 days for certain discussions, academics typically require only half a day to a full day. Fourth**,** prioritizing voices of experience: When all peer groups convene, individuals with lived experiences of poverty are allowed to speak first. This approach disrupts the conventional order where their voices are often silenced or overshadowed. Academics must empower these individuals to express their views freely, considering the emotional context of their contributions. When academics, often viewed as primary knowledge sources, speak first, it can pressure individuals living in poverty to

conform to their perspectives rather than share their own.

Fifth, ensuring equal weight of knowledge: To guarantee that the voices of individuals living in poverty carry equal weight in dialogues with other groups, it is essential to foster an environment of mutual respect and recognition. Sixth, promoting familiar language: For participants to express themselves freely, it is crucial to use language that they understand and are comfortable with.

By encouraging inclusive communication, the MoK approach actively prompts participants to confront and challenge their biases regarding poverty. This direct engagement cultivates a culture of critical reflection and empathy, distinguishing the MoK methodology from traditional and other participatory approaches that often avoid sensitive topics.

Cross-class/status communication

The MoK approach emphasizes open, respectful communication across socio-economic divides. Fostering dialogue among participants from diverse backgrounds ensures that all voices are not only heard but also valued and considered for further action. This approach stands in contrast to some participatory methods that may overlook marginalized perspectives.

Co-construction of mutual understanding

The MoK methodology promotes a collaborative environment where participants engage in discussions that lead to mutual understanding. This co-construction of knowledge contrasts with other participatory methodologies that prioritize expert-driven narratives over lived experiences.

Co-construction of Knowledge

In MoK, knowledge is not merely transferred from experts to participants; it is co-created through collaborative efforts of all peer groups. This participatory knowledge-building empowers individuals to contribute their insights, resulting in a richer understanding of poverty compared to other participatory methodologies that limit participants' active engagements.

By developing human capital, it fosters agency and resilience, distinguishing itself from traditional other participatory methodologies that do not prioritize the empowerment of disadvantaged communities. Unlike other participatory approaches, the empowerment of participants, particularly those living in poverty, is a prerequisite for the implementation of the MoK approach.

Education of more powerful groups

The MoK approach is designed to educate powerful stakeholders about the complex realities of poverty, highlighting challenges that they may not be able to address independently. By ensuring that all participants are informed and actively engaged, this reciprocal educational process fosters genuine understanding and promotes collaboration. This focus on mutual learning distinguishes the MoK methodology from other participatory approaches, enhancing its effectiveness in building meaningful partnerships.

Lasting Transformative Legacy for All Participants:

Transformation Among People with Direct Experience of Poverty

Before the research began, participants living in poverty often doubted the value of their contributions to researchers and society. One participant noted this: "*I have not attended any formal education and have no research experience, so how can the professors accept my input*?" However, as the research

progressed, these individuals began engaging more freely with one another. They conversed openly, debated, defended their viewpoints, challenged findings, and collaborated as co-researchers. This process transformed their roles from passive subjects to empowered voices capable of expressing their thoughts.

One participant noted this change, stating: "*I used to believe that knowledge only came from academics, but after participating in this research, I now understand that our knowledge is vital in eradicating poverty. We learned to trust each other, realizing that we are all equal, whether practitioners, academics, or people living in poverty.*" During the dissemination of results at the University of Arusha, an academic participant noted, "*The way individuals with lived experience of poverty presented their insights was so compelling that we could not distinguish between professors, practitioners, and those with lived experience."*

Transformation of Practitioners

Initially, practitioners undervalued the insights of individuals living in poverty, often belittling their contributions and reinforcing the status quo. They questioned, "*What can we learn from people who have not attended school? What will they say in front of professors, and will it even make sense?*" This skepticism arose from practitioners' struggles with the dual pressure of working alongside those they perceived as lacking capacity and highly educated professors, whom they viewed as legitimate authorities. Over time, however, practitioners began to reflect on their assumptions, cultivating humility and recognizing the importance of forming equal partnerships in research. One practitioner noted, "*I learned that the knowledge of academics and professionals is incomplete without insights from people living in poverty. This research has transformed my interactions with them, as I now appreciate their knowledge as valuable and unique.*"

Transformation Among Academics

Most academics consulted for the project viewed themselves as creators of knowledge. One professor declined to participate in the project, expressing uncertainty about how to engage, asking, "*How can I discuss issues concerning poverty with a poor person?*" In contrast, a senior Tanzanian academic shared, "*Working with people who have firsthand experience of poverty was enlightening. They provided valuable insights and demonstrated impressive analytical capacity. I learned a great deal about poverty from them, and together we discovered new ways of working. Without their contributions, we would not have captured the full dimensions of poverty. They spoke not of theory, but of their lived experiences.*"

One academic remarked, "*I was surprised by the logic articulated by people living in poverty regarding how their experiences should inform our conclusions.*" Another academic, new to MoK, reflected on their learning journey: "*I have employed participatory methodologies in my research for years, but I now recognize the distinctiveness of MoK compared to other approaches. I had never imagined involving people living in poverty to such an extent in the research process. Now I understand that their input is critical and significantly influences outcomes and policy making.*"

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

The study concludes that employing a merging of knowledge methodology in research enriches the knowledge base and empowers those directly affected by poverty. By prioritizing the voices of diverse groups, regardless of their power or positions in society, this methodology fosters a more inclusive and effective research environment. Similarly, UNHR and ATD (2024) differentiate the MoK from other participatory research methodologies by emphasizing its inclusivity and the concept of "deliberative triangulation." This study recommends employing a merging of

knowledge approach to address the limitations of other participatory approaches to poverty because they are designed to access knowledge from diverse groups of people, regardless of their power or position in society. Further, it can also be employed in policy formulation and implementation to meet the needs of people living in poverty.

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