

PRCPB Working Paper No. 4: Abstract

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Much recent thinking on poverty and poverty reduction is 'big' in terms of its ideas, units of analysis, datasets, plans and ambitions. While recognising some of the benefits of such approaches this paper argues that researchers should counterbalance this through 'thinking small'. It illustrates this through the life history of a poor two person household in Bangladesh. Maymana and Mofizul's story confirms much current thinking about persistent poverty in that country. Major health 'shocks' can impoverish families; social exclusion, based on gender, age and disability, keeps people poor; and, the lack of demand for unskilled labour means that the landless have few opportunities for increasing their low incomes. This story also raises challenges to contemporary orthodoxies, and new insights. In particular that: plans for poverty reduction underestimate the role that the family and informal agents play in welfare provision and exaggerate the role of poverty reduction professionals; a more critical understanding of the role of civil society in well-being and ill-being is needed; government reform is not simply about improving public service delivery but also about more effectively regulating private and civic action; disability remains a neglected issue within much development research and action; major social protection programmes will be needed if poverty is to be reduced for many of Bangladesh's poor; and, private providers of health services actively create and maintain poverty. In conclusion it points to the personal agency of Mofizul and Maymana – they may be down but they are not out.

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