

Hearing the voice of the rural poor ...

They don't stray off the tarred roads and avoid the rainy seasons.' This is how Robert Chambers, one of the foremost authors in rural development, characterises researchers who claim to have captured the reality of impoverishment. The really poor are not seen, far less heard.

These words are a challenge to HSRC researchers who are involved in research in rural development, says Dr David Hemson, Research Director in the Integrated Rural and Regional Development (IRRD) research programme. Researchers have to try new approaches to capture the voice of the marginalised poor who are often not confident to speak, even in community meetings.

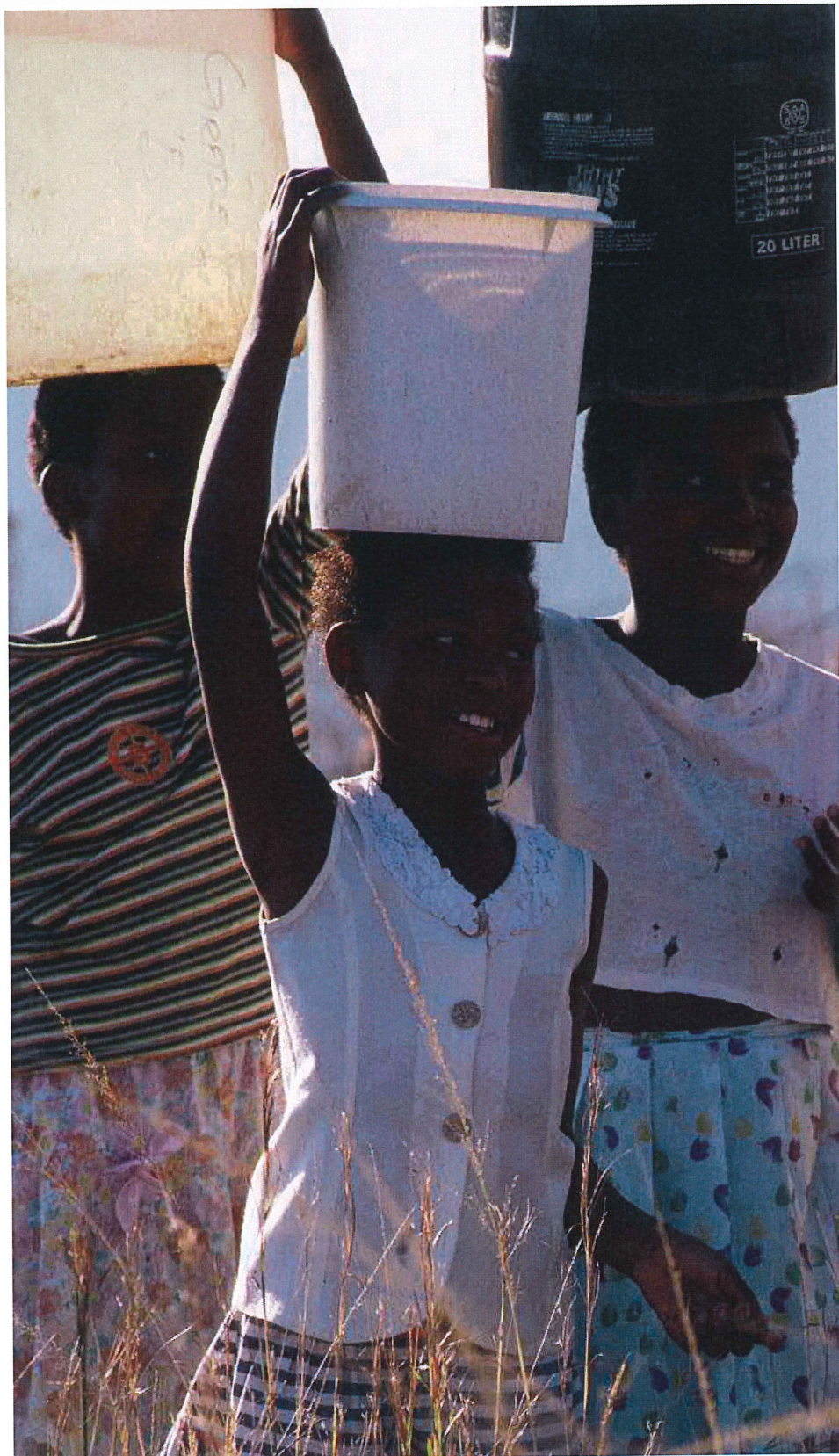
Research into rural development requires that the voice of the really poor be heard on key issues relating to the implementation of services. This involves staying in the rural communities, meeting with community health workers, and ensuring that poor families are interviewed for their opinions and perspectives.

'Researchers don't stray off the tarred roads and they avoid the rainy seasons...'

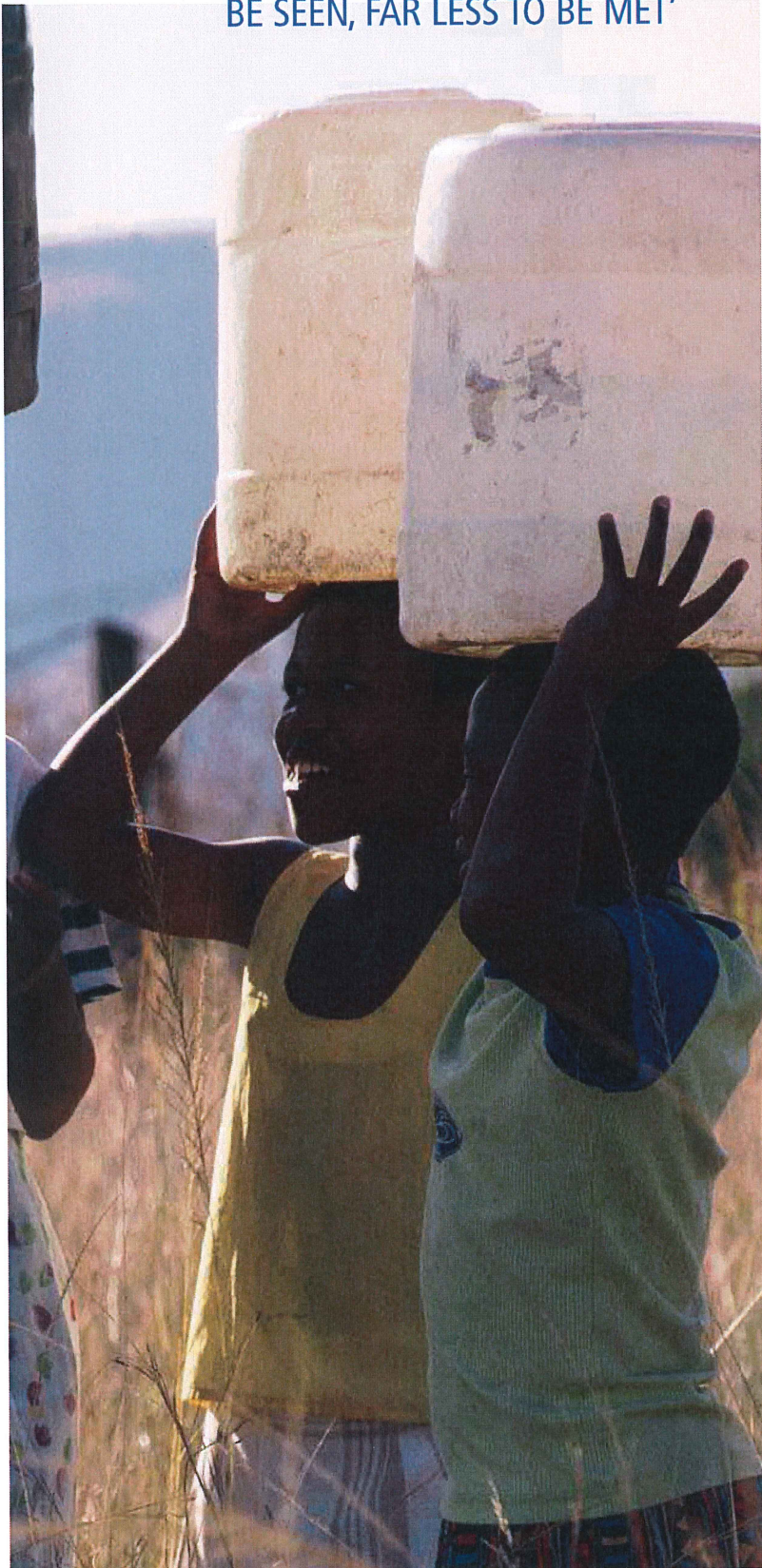
Dr Hemson himself is involved in a water and sanitation project for the Department of Water Affairs, looking at issues of sustainability and poverty eradication in rural areas – initially within KwaZulu-Natal and later countrywide. Since water delivery has been made one of the top priorities of government, services have to be seen to be reaching the truly poor and also to be sustainable.

The HSRC and IRRD specifically, is involved in a host of similar projects in rural areas, including the survival strategies of rural women, patterns of migration, and the access of child benefits by rural mothers.

The main question these researchers want to answer is whether government initiatives to



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improve the lives of the rural poor are reaching the most remote areas and making a difference.

Dr Hemson believes there is some way to go: 'Although progress has been made in some sectors in delivery, broadly the goals of rural development have yet to be met.' The reasons for this are varied and complex. At one level, there is the problem of sufficient resources, at another the capacity to manage projects. In rural areas there is also the issue of changing structures of government; although rural local government is at the centre of development, its structures are often weak.

Even if these problems are taken on board, poverty itself limits people's ability to access services. It is enormously expensive for rural poor people to travel to the nearest urban centre to register for child grants, for instance. Access to services therefore has become central both to the definition of poverty as well as its alleviation.

He points out that research into rural service delivery has to grapple with a number of important questions which HSRC researchers are trying to answer. One is what researchers into public health services call the 'inverse equity hypothesis', the tendency for the most needy to be the last to receive the benefits of a new order. Power is often clustered around the very few

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better off and educated individuals in communities, and the poor appear powerless and detached. Women are at times involved in community decision-making, but often in a subordinate role.

In rural areas there is generally an absence of a layer of well-educated, younger people who are confident in dealing with external agencies and well capable of managing a project. Often rural communities are also driven by a number of conflicts which hinder real change. Effective local government, which would provide a forum for the solution of many of these issues, is still mostly at the infant stage.

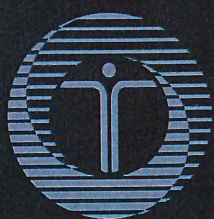
The conditions of the rural poor is a key measure of social progress in the new South Africa, Dr Hemson believes. 'The HSRC is in the forefront of monitoring and evaluating these changes. Its researchers are also engaging in the development of genuinely pro-poor policies.' He concludes: 'But most of all it is dedicated to ensuring that the voice of the rural poor is heard in the corridors of research, policy and implementation.' •

HSRC

Human Sciences Research Council

1 VOLUME No. **01** MARCH 2003

review



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