

MPPN Policy Briefing

Defining MPI Dimensions through Participation: The Case of El Salvador

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Introduction

In late 2009, El Salvador began the process of creating a multidimensional poverty measure. A central question was how to define the constitutive dimensions of this new multidimensional poverty index. How should the dimensions that best reflect what Salvadorian society considers to be the core aspects of poverty be chosen? The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) of El Salvador and the TECHO organisation, with the support of the Technical and Planning Secretariat (STPP in Spanish) of the Presidency, held a series of 23 focus groups in different areas of the country that asked people living in poverty what poverty meant to

them, the dimensions of poverty, and the strategies that they used in order to survive.

An analysis of the focus groups' responses identified the key deprivations from the participants' perspective. Five dimensions and 20 indicators that are currently part of the multidimensional measurement of poverty were established. The series of focus groups determined the definition of the dimensions and indicators of the Multidimensional Poverty Index of El Salvador (MPI-ES).^[1]



Choosing dimensions

The process of defining the dimensions of the MPI-ES began with a discussion held by the Advisory Board chaired by the STPP of El Salvador and the UNDP where, on the basis of their experience, a series of dimensions or desirable components of a multidimensional poverty measure were listed. A second exercise identified the dimensions proposed in the literature on poverty, considering reports such as the ones from the Sen-Stiglitz-Fitoussi Commission^[2] and already proven indicators, such as those contained in the Millennium Development Goals.

The Advisory Board decided that it was necessary to conduct an initial exercise with the data available in the country. With this in mind, existing surveys were analysed to identify which of the proposed indicators were measurable. The Household Survey of Multiple Purposes (EHPM in Spanish) was the main source of data, because it was the annual survey with the highest level of representation. However, this survey had good information only for three dimensions: the labour market, housing materials and basic services, and education – omitting other important topics such as health or security. There was a gap between the desired components for the MPI-ES beyond these three basic dimensions and what household surveys could deliver in terms of data.

This was an information gap that could only be remedied by changing and adding questions to the EHPM. Fortunately there were sufficient resources and political will to do this. The question that arose was this: What dimensions had to be included in the survey? At this point it was decided to promote a participative process with the population living under poverty.

Qualitative study

Between August and September 2012, the UNDP, together with the TECHO organisation, conducted a series of 23 focus groups or tables of consultation with the residents of 20 communities living in poverty. Of the 23 focus groups, 20 had adult participants (18 and over) and the other three were special groups: children, community leaders, and women. In total, about 250 people collaborated. The areas were identified with the Map of Poverty and Social Exclusion, a tool that was used to define the settlements and squatter homes that were more vulnerable.

The decision was made to implement a qualitative study that sought to understand the phenomenon through the words of people living in poverty. This type of study does not pretend to be statistically significant, but is designed to recognise many social representations and different social realities, including the particularities of rural and urban areas, women, children, areas of the country, and the elderly, amongst others. Around 30 different situations were identified from these groups.

One of the factors that made the process easier was working with the TECHO organisation, which helped carry out the focus groups. This organization is dedicated to community work in vulnerable parts of El Salvador, and its members already had the confidence of the different vulnerable populations. This community work ensured that people would not feel intimidated when talking about their lives. The process lasted two and a half months and was conducted mainly on weekends to ensure people were at home. Each group lasted approximately an hour and a half.

The fieldwork was done with several groups of researchers who had an agenda with the following four thematic blocks: the definition of poverty, the dimensions of poverty, strategies to deal with poverty, and their projections for the future (watch video about the topic). No poverty dimensions were identified in advance as the goal was to let these become apparent naturally in the course of the conversation.

From discourse to dimensions

Once the groups were finalized, an analysis was performed using the technique of discourse analysis. This allowed for the identification, on the one hand, of the deprivations most deeply felt by the Salvadorian population and, on the other hand, of the categories or dimensions of these deprivations that were most often repeated in the different groups. The next step was to give a technical translation, which meant constructing questions to be included in the EHPM that would capture these privations.

“Look at what I eat”, “see where and how we live”, “we always eat the same”, “there is no work here”, “worse if we get sick”, “one does not come out to keep the house”, or “if I would have been educated” are some of the powerful phrases that marked the analysis and delineated the indicators to be used: insecurity, overcrowding, lack of public spaces, unemployment or precarious employment, and lack of access to education (see the Figure). Each sentence describes a common experience within the population and, through this exercise, became an indicator to be measured by the index.

An inter-agency team composed of representatives of the Statistics and Census Department, the STPP, and the UNDP, with technical support from OPHI, analysed each of the gaps and identified the ones that were measurable. Forty-eight new indicators were created, resulting in approximately 70 new questions that were tested in the field with two pilot tests in 2013. Indicators were chosen based on their success in those tests, their priority for the people, and their statistical robustness. Thus, 20 indicators within five dimensions were identified to create the Multidimensional Poverty Index-El Salvador.

Main deprivations as expressed by people living in poverty in El Salvador and their corresponding indicators.

“Look at what I eat”	“The same and fried”	Food insecurity
“Look at where and how we live”	“With holes in the roof”	Inadequate roof materials
	“With dirt flooring”	Inadequate floor and walls materials
	“All crowded”	Overcrowding
	“Unable to protect ourselves”	Exposure to environmental risks and dangers
	“See where we live and how”	“Look, with shame, but this is the bathroom...”
“We do nothing but the same”	“...Here, there is no piped water”	Lack of drinkable water
	“We are scared to be evicted”	Land ownership insecurity
	“It is just that fun does not exist here”	Lack of public spaces for leisure activities
“Here, there is no job”	“Few job positions and poorly paid”	Unemployment Precarious employment
	“I work in whatever I can in whatever conditions”	Lack of social security
	“With no education there are no opportunities”	Low employability
	“There is not enough money, children have to work”	Child labour
“Worse if we get sick”	“Going to the doctor means one day less of work”	Lack of access to health services
“Or if one loses the little one owns”	“One does not go out in order to take care of the house”	Restrictions due to insecurity
	“I left for one day and robbers broke in”	Incidence of crime and felonies
“If I had been educated”	“We are not going to study anymore”	School non-attendance
	“This year s/he is not going to study, only next one”	Schooling lag

Source: Methodology for multidimensional measurement of poverty in El Salvador, internal workshop GOES. PowerPoint. January 2015

Conclusion

How to choose dimensions and indicators that better target public policies? This question was asked in El Salvador in the early stages of creating the MPI-ES. Several paths were tested. There were many suggestions for dimensions and indicators. But, understanding that poverty is more than income level, which dimensional deprivations are felt most by the poor population? To answer this question, El Salvador conducted a participatory process that was instrumental in defining the dimensions and indicators of the final index.

So far, this has been the first and only participatory process to define the dimensions of a multidimensional poverty index conducted by a country. This participation allowed for the creation of MPI-ES indicators that reflect the key deprivations of people in the Salvadorian context.

NOTES

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- [2] Commission set up by the French Government in 2008 with the aim of identifying the limitations of GDP in measuring economic performance and social progress.

FURTHER READING AND RESOURCES

FLACSO, UNDP, and Government of El Salvador – Ministry of Economy. (2010). *Poverty and social exclusion map*.

Government of El Salvador – Ministry of Economy. (2015). *Multidimensional measurement of poverty in El Salvador*.

UNDP. (2014). *Poverty in El Salvador, from the perspective of its protagonists*. [Link](#).

Video ‘Poverty in El Salvador from the perspective of its protagonists’. [Link](#).



This briefing was previously published as an article at Multidimensional Poverty Peer Network (MPPN) website ([link](#)).

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