

Oxford Poverty and Human Development Initiative

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MISSING DIMENSIONS OF POVERTY DATA

Background Information on the Indicators and Survey Modules

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INTRODUCTION

OPHI, the Oxford Poverty & Human Development Initiative, is a research institute within the University of Oxford's Department of International Development, Queen Elizabeth House. Our overall aim is to build and advance a more systematic methodological and economic framework for reducing poverty that is grounded in Nobel Laureate Amartya Sen's capability approach and related ideas. Advancing this approach requires fundamental, sustained multidisciplinary research and its effective dissemination. As an investment in future research, our first initiative has been to propose a shortlist of indicators pertaining to five aspects that are often valuable to poor people and instrumentally important to poverty reduction but not often reported internationally. We now seek to collect data that would permit us to obtain these indicators.

THE 'MISSING DIMENSIONS' OF HUMAN DEVELOPMENT

The objective of human development is to expand the freedoms that people value and have reason to value, enabling people to live more fulfilled lives and to flourish. Data on people's freedoms is needed to guide and evaluate development actions. More such data already exists than in any previous generation. Still, a critical bottleneck is a dearth of high-quality internationally comparable indicators of key freedoms. Our current goal is to identify and advocate the collection of data for a small set of indicators on 'missing' dimensions of human development that often matter to poor people. The specific dimensions we have identified include:

- **Employment**, including both formal and informal employment, with particular attention as to the quality of employment (Lugo 2007);
- **Empowerment**, or agency: the ability to advance goals one values and has reason to value (Ibrahim and Alkire 2007);
- **Physical safety**, focusing on security from violence to property and person, as well as domestic violence and perceived violence (Diprose 2007);
- **The ability to go about without shame**, to emphasize the importance of dignity, respect and freedom from humiliation (Zavaleta 2007); and

We have also developed one survey module in an area which we do not necessarily consider to be a dimension of poverty, but for which greater internationally comparable data are required:

- **Psychological and subjective wellbeing**, to emphasize meaning, satisfaction and their determinants (Samman 2007).

The following criteria were used to choose suitable indicators for inclusion in individual or household surveys. First, the indicators needed to be *internationally comparable*. This is particularly important as there is a dearth of information available on comparative indicators of our 'missing dimensions'. Second, the indicators seek to assess not only the instrumental but also the *intrinsic* aspects of the dimensions we propose. Third, it was essential to select indicators that would be able to identify *changes* in our dimensions over time. Fourth, and crucially, the choice of the indicators draws on *experience with particular indicators* to date, i.e., how frequently these indicators have been previously fielded and found to be 'adequate' measures for research purposes. The perception-based indicators have been less frequently used in nationally-representative surveys but have been subject to psychometric testing for reliability and validity; these indicators ought to be further scrutinized particularly in the context of poorer countries.

1. EMPLOYMENT

Employment is certainly not a new dimension of well-being, but it is sometimes forgotten in human development and poverty reduction policies or, at least, not considered in sufficient depth. Employment is the main source of income for most families in the world. Having a good and decent job is generally associated with being out of poverty, however poverty is defined. Additionally, employment can give a sense of self-respect and fulfilling life (Sen and ILO, 1975). There is hence no question as to the importance of employment as a fundamental aspect of individual wellbeing. However, less agreement exists as to how much and which types of employment are necessary.

We propose five indicators of employment to help answer these questions, at a global level. Four of these relate to the *quality* of employment. These comprise informal employment; income from self-employment; occupational safety and health; and under- and over-employment. The final indicator relates to *quantity*; it seeks to determine the level of discouraged unemployment – i.e., people who would like to be working but have stopped looking for a job.

2. EMPOWERMENT

Empowerment or agency has been defined as “what a person is free to do and achieve in pursuit of whatever goals or values he or she regards as important” (Sen 1985, p. 206) and more simply, as “someone who acts and brings about change” (Sen 1999, p. 19). The opposite of a person with agency is someone who is coerced, oppressed or passive. Agency recurs as a variable that is of intrinsic and instrumental importance to impoverished communities.

Building on a growing body of empirical research, we propose a ‘short list’ of empowerment indicators. In brief, we use a *household decision-making* question to identify who makes decisions about different areas of household life and whether the respondent could if he or she chose. To measure the extent to which people feel themselves to be coerced, and /or acting on their own initiative, we propose, uniquely, *autonomy* measures from psychology that have been tested across cultures and recently in poor communities. Finally, the questions explore the extent to which individuals feel empowered to bring about change at both individual and community levels.

3. PHYSICAL SAFETY

One of the greatest impediments to human security in the post-Cold War era is not war fought by the armed forces of nation states, but violence perpetrated by individuals, groups and state actors within nations’ internal borders (Hegre *et al.* 2001). Violence undoes the development gains achieved in areas such as education, health, employment, income generation and infrastructure provision. Further, it impedes human freedom to live safely and security, and can sustain poverty traps in many communities. However, violence is not inevitable to human interaction. Most multi-ethnic, multi-religious and poor peoples live in peace. There is a need for reliable and comparable data of violence against both person and property to greater inform our understanding of these concepts.

We propose a series of questions designed to measure violence derived from both conflict and crime – two categories that are not normally combined in survey instruments. In particular, we seek to identify the incidence and frequency of both general crime and conflict-related violence against person and property; the incidence of domestic violence (among women); perceptions of domestic violence (whether or not it is considered a punishable act); and perceptions of threat(s) to security and safety, both now and in the future.

4. THE ABILITY TO GO ABOUT WITHOUT SHAME

Shame and humiliation are essential to our understanding of poverty yet internationally comparable data on these dimensions are missing. Based on existing indicators from related fields, we propose eight indicators to measure specific aspects of shame and humiliation.

Indicators for measuring shame have been selected from the HIV/AIDS-related stigma literature and from psychometric tests used in psychology. The first indicator relates to the *shame of being associated with poverty*, or the *stigma of poverty*. The second indicator relates to *shame proneness*, which refers to “the tendency to experience the emotion of shame in response to specific negative events” (Tangney and Dearing 2002, p. 2003). Shame proneness is particularly relevant because it affects social relationships, self-respect and “the ability to go about without shame”, which are all aspects of capability poverty. Indicators of humiliation refer to that experienced in response to external events and to the internal experience of humiliation. These indicators refer particularly to *respectful treatment*, *unfair treatment* and *discrimination*.

5. PSYCHOLOGICAL AND SUBJECTIVE WELLBEING

Psychological and subjective states of wellbeing have intrinsic and instrumental value. They are a key component of the other dimensions we propose, as well as an end result of their attainment. Moreover, they stand to contribute a richer perspective to our understanding of human experience and values, and particularly the importance of its non-material components.

We advocate a two-pronged approach to psychological wellbeing based on 1) perceptions of *meaning in life*, defined by the respondent based on his/her own unique potential; and 2) the ability to strive towards excellence in fulfilling this idea. To develop these concepts, we draw on Steger’s Meaning in Life questionnaire (Steger *et al.* 2006), and on Deci and Ryan’s measures of the psychological needs associated with goal identification and pursuit, which in turn predict ‘optimal functioning’ (Ryan and Deci 2000, 2001). These needs are autonomy, competence and relatedness. To capture *subjective wellbeing*, we propose the separate measurement of life satisfaction and happiness, and that the satisfaction measure consider life overall and several distinct domains that are argued to be important – namely, material wellbeing (food, income, housing), health, work, physical safety, relations with friends and family, education, one’s neighbourhood, the ability to actively help others, and wellbeing from spiritual/religious/philosophical beliefs.

Specific questionnaires pertaining to each of these topics are available in a companion document (OPHI 2007), available on our website (www.ophi.org.uk).

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