

MULTIDIMENSIONALITY OF URBAN POVERTY: AN INQUIRY INTO THE CRUCIAL FACTORS AFFECTING WELL-BEING OF THE URBAN POOR IN SRI LANKA

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Abstract

Although, identification of the nature of poverty in a specific setting is crucial for poverty analysis and designing targeted poverty reducing programs, there is no consensus among researchers, policymakers etc. on the dimensions of poverty, due to the multidimensionality and the universality of the phenomena. Even the criteria for selecting dimensions used in the literature remain controversial. Although, the poverty has been greatly discussed recently in Sri Lanka as in many other developing countries, most of the analysts have focused mainly on the identification of incidence and trends of poverty based on uni-dimensional approach. It is hard to find the methodical attempts which are made to identify the border aspects of well-being and poverty of mankind. The main objective of this paper is to identify the dimensions of urban poverty in the light of conventional methodologies and historical knowledge. Qizilbash's 'core poor' framework was applied in this analysis. Findings revealed that shelter, clean drinking water, children's education, health service, environmental pollution, addiction to drugs/ alcoholism, uncertainty about the future, sanitation, domestic violence and stability of livelihood are the crucial factors of well-being of urban poor.

Keywords: Poverty, multidimensionality, urban poor, perceptions of the poor, Sri Lanka

INTRODUCTION

Traditionally the poverty is perceived as an entity derived from material deprivation. Consequently measures of poverty connected with material components, mainly monetary terms were widely used. With the identification of the multidimensional nature of poverty, and money or income can little to do in ensuring well-being of human-being; the focus was shifted

towards other dimensions of well-being of people. To understand the real situations of the lives of people and for the effective policy formulation towards enhancing living standard of them, the identification of real factors affecting their lives is very important. However, it is not an easy task because on the one hand there is not an accepted set of criteria which can be applied to select the relevant dimensions. On the other hand the dimensions which determine the living standard vary from person to person, region to region and country to country depending on the extent of heterogeneity of people and diversity of the locations (Semasinghe, 2015). Hence, the formulation of specific criteria to determine the relevant dimensions of poverty is indispensable though it is practically difficult. It is also accepted that researchers have freedom to determine the relevant dimensions according to their studies independently. However as mentioned above, undoubtedly, it will be a very difficult exercise because the poverty is associated with numerous demographic, socio-economic, cultural, environmental, and physiological elements. These factors affect on well-being and lead to poverty of people in multitudes of ways. Some factors are affecting largely while others marginally depending on the prevailing conditions of the context. Therefore researchers have used diverse methodologies in order to select the relevant dimensions for their assessments. Number of different works of researchers as well as academics over the identification of the factors or dimensions of poverty could be found in the development literature; for example, Robeyns (2003a) Nussbaum (2000) Alkire and Black (1997), Semasinghe (2015) and Siddhisena and Jayathilaka (2004).

Purpose of this study is to identify the 'core dimensions' of urban poverty in Sri Lanka and to understand the real shape of the lives of the urban poor. The findings will help to understand and to assess the poverty in the urban sector more realistically. Also identification of real dimensions will help to policymakers for efficient policy formulation. However, it should be noted that the findings may not be valid for the whole urban sector in Sri Lanka because the examination is confined to the very specific geographic area of the Colombo city.

Why urban poverty is significant?

The focus of the governments, policymakers as well as researchers on the urban poverty in many less developed countries is very little compared to the rural poverty. Moreover, poverty alleviation strategies which focused on urban sector are also very little. In fact, this is acceptable because poverty incidence in the rural sector has become one of the central issues than urban poverty in these countries. However, some factors should be taken into account when we are talking about the urban poverty. The most common factor is that although poverty rates in this sector is low compared to the rural sector, in terms of the number of absolute poor the situation in urban sector is also critical as in rural sector. Our experiences reveal that the lives of the

urban poor are acute than the rural poor. Though many of them are not poor in terms of income, they are deprived largely of some crucial aspects such as housing, education, sanitation, environment and health. Most critical aspect is the deprivation of their social lives. Their well-being is hampered by discrimination, social exclusion, and violence, insecurity of tenure, environmental conditions that threaten health, changes in the prices of basic goods, lack of social networks (de Haan, 1997).

The urban population in less developed countries mainly in Asia is increasing rapidly. As revealed by the 'Asia 2050' a study of the Asian Development Bank (ADB) urbanization is one of the central trends of the development of Asia in the coming decades. According to the UN projections, more people will live in urban areas than rural areas by 2030. At 2050, two-third of the population in developing countries is likely to be in urban areas. Though urban population in these countries increase rapidly, the decline of the share of urban poverty is much slower in many countries. With increasing the urban share of the population some Asian countries may face increasing urban poverty which is labelling as 'urbanization of poverty' (Muthur, 2014). Though urbanization is a positive impact of economic growth, it will become a serious issue in these countries.

Urban Sector in Sri Lanka

As defined by the Department of Census and Statistics (DCS) urban sector in Sri Lanka includes the areas governed by Municipal Councils and Urban Councils. However, it should be noted that growing suburbs adjoining these areas exhibits largely urban characteristics though they are governing by other local governments. According to the DCS definition, urban sector in Sri Lanka in terms of geographic area and extent of population is relatively as well as absolutely small. The DCS estimates that the share of the urban household population in Sri Lanka is more than 15 percent of the total population and is growing at around 3 percent per year while Sri Lanka's population is growing at around 1 percent per year.

According to the official poverty line, poverty head count index (HCI) in urban sector is 2.1 while contribution to the total poverty is only about 5.6 percent. These imply that income poverty in urban sector is relatively low. Though, many urban inhabitants are not poor in terms of income as in other developing countries they have deprived of number of other economic and social dimensions such as sanitary, discrimination, social exclusion, and violence, insecurity of tenure, environmental conditions that threaten health, changes in the prices of basic goods, lack of social networks (Gunawardena, 1999). The extent of deprivation may differ from city to city.

Specifying dimensions of well-being and poverty

In any attempt of evaluating the incidence of poverty and formulating the effective policy measures, identification of the dimension of poverty is crucial (Semasinghe, 2015). There is no consensus among researchers as well as many others who are working with poverty, on what elements should be taken into account as dimension of poverty. Although some favor the argument on one list of dimensions for every location, for example Nussbaum (2000), others for example, Alkire (2002) disagree. Indeed it is unrealistic to think of such specific list due to the heterogeneity of human being as well as the diversities of the different sectors. Also, there are no commonly accepted measures to define the relevant dimensions. Therefore researchers explicitly or implicitly acknowledge that formulating an identical list for each study is desirable. However, in these efforts researchers must pay their attention strictly to avoid the possible risk of bias in selecting the elements. Undeniably the researcher's personal attitudes, customs, belief, social norms, his own discipline, his value preferences, data availability, available facilities etc. will influence in selecting relevant dimensions. These will influence on the universality of the findings and conclusions. Robeyns (2003; 2003a) has suggested five criteria that can be used to avoid possible bias in selecting relevant dimensions. They are explicit formulation, methodological justification, sensitivity to context, different level of generality and exhaustion and non-reduction. However, as Robeyns says, these provide a general guidance to avoid or at least to reduce the possible bias that can be occurred selecting dimensions but not rules that should strictly follow. Alkire (2007) has recorded five principles that researchers generally follow either alone or as a combination. They are (i) existing data or convention, (ii) normative assumptions, (iii) public consensus, (iv) ongoing deliberative participatory process, and (v) empirical evidence regarding people's values.

Many researchers have endeavored to make lists of relevant dimensions using diverse methodologies. Klasen (2000) has chosen 14 components to measure the poverty and deprivation in South Africa in his study on "Measuring Poverty and Deprivation in South Africa". The list includes education, income, wealth, housing, water, sanitation, energy, employment, transport, financial services, nutrition, health care, safety, and perceived well-being. However, he has not clearly mentioned the methodology which he followed to select these components.

Clark and Qizilbash (2005) have selected 12 components as 'core dimensions' in their study on 'Core Poverty, Basic Capabilities and Vagueness: An Application to the South African Context'. The dimensions sought are clean water, health, access to health care, housing, jobs, education, freedom, nutrition, safety, self worth and respect, survival and religion. They applied the approach of 'core poverty' developed by Qizilbash (2003) on the insights in Kit Fine's

'supervaluationist' account of vagueness (Fine, 2975). This approach allows developing a method that can be used to identify the admissible dimension of poverty and well-being.

In the urban context, poverty and vulnerability (a dynamic concept whereby the "vulnerable" face the risk of falling into poverty) can be related to three distinctive characteristics of urban life: commoditization (reliance on the cash economy), environmental hazard (stemming from the density and hazardous location of settlements and from exposure to multiple pollutants), and social fragmentation (lack of community and of interhousehold mechanisms for social security, compared to those in rural areas) (Moser, Gatehouse, and Garcia 1996b)

Montgomery (2009) has revealed 8 dimensions of urban poverty. They are health, private goods and services, leisure time, shelter, health related public services, freedom from violence and crime, personal efficacy, and collective efficacy and political voice.

Siddhisena and Jayathilaka (2004) have selected 7 dimensions as the most important factors to meet the basic needs of the poor in their effort to develop a composite indicator of multidimensional poverty to capture the non-income dimension of poverty in Sri Lanka as a part of the study on "Identification of the Poor in Sri Lanka: Development of Composite Indicator and Regional Poverty Lines". The selected indicators are: nutrition, primary education, health care, sanitation, safe water, housing facilities and income. The Weighted Principle Component (PC) based Factor Analysis was used to select and weight the factors.

According to Mathur (2014) dimensions relate to the vulnerability of the urban poor includes inadequate access to land and housing, physical infrastructure and services, economic and livelihood sources, health and education facilities, social security networks, and voice and empowerment.

Semasinghe (2015) has made an attempt to identify the core dimensions of rural poverty in Sri Lanka. This work is based on the methodology suggested by Qizilbash (2003) which describes below under the conceptual framework. Accordingly, six elements i.e. food, health, education, housing, drinking water and sanitation qualified to become core dimensions of rural poverty in Sri Lanka. In addition to that number of researchers has attempted to determine the relevant dimensions of well-being and poverty to the specific contexts. Even though each list has several identical components such as education and health most are differ from each other. For example some lists include economic and social components while others in addition to those physiological components too.

Conceptual framework

The approach of the present study based mainly on the framework developed by Qizilbash in his studies on "*A note on the measurement of poverty and vulnerability in the South African*

Context” (2002) and “*Vague language and precise measurement: the case of poverty*” (2003). In fact, the framework of Qizilbash is based on the Kit Fine’s (1975) ‘supervaluationist’ account of vagueness. On this account, a specification of poverty is ‘admissible’ if (roughly speaking) it makes sense as a way of articulating the notion of poverty. Furthermore, according to this framework, a vague statement is ‘super-true’ if and only if it is true on all admissible ways of making it more precise. In this sense, if anyone is poor on all admissible ways of making ‘poor’ is ‘core poor’. The important characteristic of this approach is that if someone (household) is doing sufficiently badly in terms of any one dimension, he/she is ‘core poor’ as long as that dimension is core. In making this judgment, it is not necessary to concern how she/he is doing on all dimensions.

Another matter that should be taken into consideration is that how to define the so-called ‘core dimensions’. Writings of Max Black (1937) provides key information in order to approach this matter appropriately. According to Black, various people specify the relevant terms in different ways. The degree of ambiguity about the use of the relevant terms might then be measured by the extent of assent or dissent about its use by those who use it (Clark and Qizilbash, 2005). On the basis of this notion, among various relevant dimensions of poverty ‘core dimension’ can be identified using the degree of assent or dissent on particular dimension of the relevant group of people. Virtually, a dimension can be defined as ‘core’ or ‘basic’ if there is little or no dissent about it being a dimension of poverty. At the same time, it can be judged that a dimension is admissible if even a small proportion of people identify it as a dimension of poverty. To the contrary, if no one articulates a particular dimension as an element of poverty, it is not admissible.

If Fine’s ‘supervaluationist’ framework combined with Black’s insight, 100% endorsements of the respondents are required for a dimension count as a ‘core dimension’. That is only dimensions that every persons who interviewed in a field survey identified as critical dimensions can be counted as ‘core dimensions’. On the contrary, if any one fails to endorse a dimension it is considered as ‘non-core dimension’. This line of thought is to be employed to define the relevant dimensions in this work.

Similar technique has been employed in the work conducted to determine the dimension of rural poverty in Sri Lanka by Semasinghe (2015). The essential nature of this framework is that it takes into account the poor’s perception in defining the dimensions of poverty of them. Through this framework it could be recognised the true facts about the well-being of the urban poor because they know about them accurately than others.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Study Area

This empirical assessment is based on the data collected from five different tenements (wathu) namely 133, 157, 169, 219 and 233 in the Madampitiya Grama Niladhari (GN) division, in Colombo Divisional Secretariat located within the administrative district 1 of the Colombo Municipal Council area. The land extent of the GN division is about 0.49 sq. km. Total population in the area which belong to 2621 households is 11,686. Number of housing units within the division is 2478. Permanent type housing units in the area is only about 50 percent while majority of others are semi-permanent. It is a multi-ethnic and multi-religious society. The inhabitant are fighting with number of serious issues including proper housing, sanitation, drinking water, garbage disposal, health issues, domestic violence, and alcoholism.

Sampling Design

A sample of 100 persons belong to 100 households in the five tenements, mentioned above were selected randomly using the 'list of households' maintained by the Grama Niladhari. In the analysis 4 questionnaires were excluded due to the incompleteness. The aim of the survey was to capture and identify the people's views on the essential dimensions that affect on their lives. The individuals who were encountered into the survey were chosen purposively from the selected household. In this exercise an attempt was made as much as possible as to pick the individuals with sufficient education level which is well enough to understand questions, and also a persons who playing a key role within the respective household. Pre-tested short questionnaire was used as a schedule to collect the views of the respondents.

Identification of Dimensions of Poverty

Perceptions of the poor were the main thought which was existed behind this approach. Accordingly, a two-step exercise to identify the dimensions of poverty was conducted. Firstly, a list of elements which were considered as essentials to improve the living standards of the poor was prepared based on the understanding of the poor themselves.

In this endeavour each respondent was asked to tell the most important requirements which affect their living standard. Respondents were encouraged to think and reveal the elements as many as possible.

Next, considering the real meaning behind the words they stated in their own words and their emotions, the large number of elements they stated was sorted-out into 27 dimensions as given in table 1.

Table 1: The Dimensions of well-being of the urban poor

Admissible dimensions	Admissible dimensions
1. Shelter	15. Clean environment
2. Clean drinking water	16. Sufficient income
3. Self-respect	17. Crime prevalence
4. Children's education	18. Addiction to drugs/Alcoholism
5. Freedom	19. Security
6. Marital instability	20. Sanitation
7. Disputes within the family	21. Domestic violence
8. Job-related training	22. Stability of livelihood
9. Health	23. Discrimination
10. Income	24. Electricity
11. Plot of land	25. Drainage system
12. Playground	26. Food security
13. Peace in household environment	27. Uncertainty about future
14. Marginalization	

Though there are only 27 elements those include the hundreds of views that reflect the life of the urban poor as whole. Seemingly these dimensions not much differ from the dimensions of the urban sector in many countries in the Asian region.

Undoubtedly all these elements are affecting on the quality of life and well-being of the urban poor but in different extent. However, some of them are *critically affect for a good life*. For an example, clean drinking water is a crucial requirement than a playground. Thus, such critical dimensions should have to be separated from the above set of elements. This issue can be handled based on the conceptual framework explained previously. According to Fine's accounts, critical dimensions are necessarily being among these 'admissible' dimensions i.e. among the dimensions mentioned above.

Hence, an attempt was made to filter out the most basic elements i.e. essential dimensions, which need for a *good life* within the urban setting from the set of 'admissible' dimensions. In fact the *good life* means here is the life *satisfied with the essentials for a tolerable life* rather than a *life with broader and high standard*. However, it is the status higher than that of just *survives*. Hence it should definitely include the elements more than those satisfy basic needs. Consequently, the respondents were asked to 'identify the most crucial elements among these in order to ensure a good life for their families'. Field assistants were advised further to explain the question using the alternative phrases such as, "what is a good life", and "the essential dimensions are the fundamentals without which a person cannot cope or manage at all, and without which life is unbearable. These can be aspects of life that people have, or don't have and need", but the researcher did not suggest any possible answers. This method

has used in identifying the essential dimensions of rural poor in Sri Lanka by Semasinghe (2015).

Table below includes the mostly stated dimensions among the 27 admissible dimensions with the number of respondents which mentioned particular dimension as an 'essential dimension' and the percentages of respondents. Accordingly, 100% endorsements have received only for one dimension i.e. shelter. Hence, if the assessment is based on the Black's view, only this element can be counted as essential dimension from all the above elements. Certainly 100% endorsement is a rigorous criterion which cannot hold in practice. One cannot be expected *all people* do mention all the elements of a set of dimensions as essential dimensions, particularly when the number of respondents is large because peoples are not homogeneous; their perception, experience, aspiration etc. might different from each other. Also, it cannot be expected 100 percent perfect interviewing process without even a tiny error. If we strictly retain on the above criterion, only shelter and drinking water would be classified as 'essential dimensions'. If so, the notion of multidimensionality of poverty would be irrational. Not only that, we are compelled to classify some dimensions (e.g. food and health) which is very small number of people failed to endorse as essential dimensions. Hence, it was decided to treat a dimension as an 'essential dimension' though 'relatively small' number of respondents fails to endorse it.

Table 2: The Dimensions got highest number of Endorsements

Dimension	Number of endorsements	Percentage
Shelter	96	100.0
Clean drinking water	93	97.0
Self-respect	62	65.0
Children's education	93	97.0
Freedom	68	71.0
Marital stability	70	76.0
Job-related training	68	71.0
Health service	92	96.0
Environmental pollution	93	97.0
Addiction to drugs/Alcoholism	95	99.5
Uncertainty about the future	93	97.0
Sanitation	95	99.5
Domestic violence	91	95.0
Stability of livelihood	91	95.0
Discrimination	64	66.7
Drainage system	88	92.0
Food security	88	91.7
Income/means of income	86	90.0
Peace in household environment	90	94.0

Next, the term 'relatively small' must be clearly defined because the term is vague; not given a clear idea. It might be any small percentage of responses. If it is as small as 1% of the respondents (this implies that endorsements are 99%) only two components i.e. shelter and sanitation select as 'core dimensions'. It is clear that 99% endorsement is rigorous cut-off as 100% endorsement. If it increases up to 10% all the components might include into the set of 'core dimensions'. Hence, as Clark and Qizilbash (2005) suggest 95% criterion is salient than others. Accordingly, 95% of the endorsement is adequate for any dimension to be a 'core dimension' for a good life. To the contrary, any dimension which has not endorsed over 5% of the respondents is classifies as a 'non-core dimension'.

The 95% rule clearly separates the 10 out of 19 dimensions of Table 2. They are (i) shelter (ii) clean drinking water, (iii) children's education, (iv) health service, (v) environmental pollution, (vi) addiction to drugs/alcoholism, (vii) uncertainty about the future, (viii) sanitation, (ix) Domestic violence and (x) stability of livelihood. Among these first four are economic dimensions while others are social dimensions. Looking in another way first five dimensions could be considered as basic needs dimensions while others are community dimensions.

The only dimension which every respondent has endorsed is the 'shelter'. This indicates that housing is the acute problem in this sector. In fact, the endorsement over the shelter by all respondents reveals a most common cultural aspect of the Sri Lankan society. The common belief among the people in the Sri Lankan society is that shelter is the important requirement for well-being than even food.

Almost all respondents have identified sanitation and drug addiction/alcoholism as another key aspect of poverty. Education, health and clean drinking water dimensions are common to both rural and urban sectors. Though food security and income have identified as admissible dimensions, they are not endorsed by sufficient number of respondents so as to be qualified as 'core dimensions'. These two were among the core dimensions of rural poverty according to the study conducted by Semasinghe (2009). What this implies is that as many urban poor have perceived they are not deprived of income and food capabilities compared as its rural counterpart. Domestic violence, environmental pollution and instability of livelihood are exclusive aspects of urban poverty. These three were not included even in the list of admissible dimensions of the rural sector.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

In this exercise, an attempt was made to determine the core factors that determine the living standard of urban inhabitants of Sri Lanka. The study was based on the framework suggested by Qizilbash with the inspiration of Kit Fine's (1975) 'supervaluationist' account of vagueness.

Lastly, the relevant dimensions were selected based on the peoples' understanding on the lives they value.

The data analysis reveals that all the urban poor are not poor in terms of income or consumption but they are largely deprived of non-income dimensions. Though some elements, namely peace in household environment, domestic violence, discrimination, marginalization and self-respect are not enlisted due to the lack of endorsement undoubtedly they are also key dimensions of urban poverty. Moreover, since both urban sector and the poverty are dynamic phenomena, these selected dimensions as well as admissible elements might be changed even within the short period of time.

The list of admissible dimensions as well as core dimensions are considerably differ from the list derived by Semasighe (2015) in his study on the dimensions of rural poverty using the similar technique. However, housing, sanitation, health and drinking water are common for the both sectors. Those have included in the set of dimensions derived by Siddhisena and Jayathilaka (2004) using weighted Principle Component based Factor analysis. This proves that though there are sector specific dimensions, the core dimensions not differ significantly according to the sectors in Sri Lanka.

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