



An Essay Urban Poverty Assessment in Southeast Asia: Gaps and Challenges

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November 2014

I. INTRODUCTION

The definition and measurement of poverty has an immense impact on the development of poverty reduction policies and its beneficiaries. International Institutions such as the World Bank or the United Nations (UN) were pioneering with their assessment tools the global understanding of poverty. Although there are several alternative approaches for measuring poverty, the universalized indicators such as the \$1 poverty line are still dominating literature and politics. According to the World Development Report (WDR) in 2000, 'poverty is pronounced deprivation in wellbeing' (WDR 2000 cited after Kakwani 2006: 20). But what is wellbeing? What are the aspects of a good life? Who decides what these aspects are? Finding an answer to these questions is indeed a difficult task to undertake.

In the socioeconomic literature, a broad spectrum of different approaches is found, trying to describe poverty. Which indicators and whose perspective are used? Every society, every community and every individual has distinct perceptions of wellbeing. How can these views be joined? Should there be a claim for a universalized notion of poverty at all?

This essay analyses the gaps and challenges of urban poverty assessment in Southeast Asia. It gives an overlook of the definitions, approaches and concepts of poverty as well as a critical analysis of current poverty assessment tools in use. In particular, the differences of rural and urban poverty assessment are filtered out. Moreover, urbanization and its impact on poverty in Southeast Asia and the prevailing poverty situation are discussed.

II. DEFINITION, CONCEPT, MEASUREMENT AND METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

'The more enters into the highly complex universe of poverty, [...] [i]t appears then clearly that poverty is too large, too ambivalent, too relative, too general and too contextual and culture-specific a concept to be defined on a universal basis.' (Rahnema 2005: 5)

There is an extensive body of literature on definitions, concepts, approaches and measurements of poverty. However, the term 'poverty' still remains contested. Historically as well as from a linguistic point of view, the word 'poverty' has multiple meanings. For instance in African languages, poverty has up to five referents and in the Middle Age even 40. Yet, these definitions have little in common with the modern concept of poverty. According to Majid Rahnema, poor was not always contrary to rich, i.e. being excluded from one's community or public humiliation defined poor. In traditional societies poverty was connoted with frugality or a simple form of life whereby 'nobody goes hungry' and those who were not able to maintain themselves were given provisions by the community. (Shaffer 2012: 1769)



With social changes, induced by industrialization, urbanization and globalization, poverty was characterized by inadequate income earning opportunities. People are not lacking their basic 'necessaries' anymore but their imputed needs. (ibid) Wolfgang Sachs emphasized that the people are '[...] caught up in the money economy as workers and consumers whose spending power is so low that they fall by the wayside.' (Sachs 1992 cited in Shaffer 2012: 1770)

Defining poverty

The modern understanding of poverty dates back to S. Seebhom Rowntree's study of York in the late 19th and early 20th century who defined the term as '[e]arnings insufficient to obtain the minimum necessities for the maintenance of merely physical efficiency'. (Rowntree 1908 cited in Anker 2005) The general definition of poverty is income or consumption based and refers to the need for a minimum standard of living, measured by monetary resources. (Anker 2005: 4) Hereby typical and influential definitions are as following:

People can be said to be in poverty when they are deprived of income and other resources needed to obtain the conditions of life – the diets, material goods, amenities, standards and services – that enable them to play the roles, meet the obligations and participate in the relationships and customs of their society. (Townsend 2006: 5)

Poverty is hunger. Poverty is lack of shelter. Poverty is being sick and not being able to see a doctor. Poverty is not having access to school and not knowing how to read. Poverty is not having a job, is fear for the future, living one day at a time. Poverty has many faces, changing from place to place and across time, and has been described in many ways. Most often, poverty is a situation people want to escape. (World Bank 2010)

These definitions have two key features that are fundamental for any other definition of poverty: Firstly, poverty is a situation which is lacking adequate resources to meet the basic needs. Secondly, the definition of poverty needs to reflect community perceptions, as Townsend's reference to standards, services and amenities. (Saunders 2004: 4 f.) Thus an essential element is outlined: The notion of poverty must integrate the experiences of the people who are poor to reflect their realities in order to set effective actions to combat poverty.



As known in development discussions, the modern understanding of poverty is predominantly shaped by the (western) professionals who reproduce their own idea as non-poor according to their point of view. Common notions of poverty are built up primarily on the experts' standpoint and omit the view of the objects of the definition, 'the poor'. Yet, it is important to consider, who is asking what poverty is, how it is understood and who responds to it. Hence, to actually think pro-poor, it is necessary to ask the right question, from the perspective of those who are poor, marginalized or vulnerable. This would be in various forms and different languages: 'What can you do to reduce our bad experiences of life and living, and enable us to achieve more of the good things in life to which we aspire?' (Chambers 2006: 3f.) The development of an adequate approach to measure poverty and comprehensive understanding of the people's needs require the incorporation of more bottom-up perceptions of the powerless than top-down notions of (western) professionals.

Conceptualizing poverty

Three central concepts of poverty emerged in the past two centuries that widely shaped internationally used measurement approaches (Townsend 2006: 5 f.; Townsend 1987:):

- 1) The idea of subsistence evolved in Victorian England by nutritionists such as Rowntree. A family was defined as poor when their income minus rent came below the set poverty line whereby food made the greatest share.
- 2) The concept of basic needs, primarily supported by the International Labor Organization (ILO) in the 1970s, included not only minimum consumption needs of a family (e.g., shelter, adequate food, clothing, etc.) but also essential service provided by the community (e.g., safe water, public transport, health, education, etc.). This concept was seized on mainly by the international community, in particular the UN agencies.
- 3) With changing living situations, the concept of relative deprivation evolved in the late 20th century that applies to income and other resources as well as to material and social conditions. A person is recognized as relative deprived if he/she cannot acquire sufficient or at all the conditions of life (e.g., diet, amenities, standards, etc.) that are necessary to be an active participant in society.

All three concepts, however, have problems in formulating poverty: The subsistence concept is focusing only on physical and not social needs. The concept of basic needs includes social conditions as indicators but omits needs, such as personal amenities. And the concept of relative deprivation is too arbitrary as amenities are more a matter of choice than an actual indicator of poverty.



As already inferred from the previous, there are a number of obstacles that complicate the definition of poverty. In an era of globalization to develop a universal definition that is applicable for all countries and people appears to be futile. Is it based on material aspects of life or also social, cultural and political aspects? Is it a mono-dimensional (e.g., income) or multi-dimensional approach (e.g., income, health conditions, education, family status, etc.)? Should it be poverty in absolute (ensuring a form of necessary minimum subsistence to have a decent life, e.g., value of basic food or minimum income) or relative (referring to a standard of living defined in relation to the position of other people, e.g., on income) terms? Who decides what is “necessary” and “minimum”? Should the scope of poverty be at the individual, household or geographic area level? (see Laderchi et al. 2006: 10; see FAO 2005: 3 ff.)

Four approaches

Up to now, there is no consensus, how to combine all issues in order to develop an effective, universal definition and measurement method. From country to country, poverty situations and perceptions about suffering and harm are different. People live in different living conditions, have different needs, different understanding of material, physical and social wellbeing, they are subject to different laws and customs and so on. Empirical studies showed that poverty rates differ drastically, depending on the applied approach (Laderchi et al. 2006: 11). Therefore, development experts (Laderchi et al.) suggest adopting a combination of four different methods or approaches to reflect more accurate poverty situations:

1) Monetary approach:

The most dominant and widely used measurement method for poverty is the monetary approach. Poverty is hereby identified by economic-wellbeing via indicators such as income or consumption. This threshold represents the minimum needs or costs by an individual or household to avoid poverty which is typically a basket of goods to afford the required calorific standard. The valuation of the income indicator is computed at market prices, wherefore the market has to be identified and those components that cannot be valued through the market need to have imputed monetary values (e.g., subsistence production, social service or other public goods). Economics consider this approach as most suitable as it underpins macroeconomics whereby a consumer seeks to maximize utility and the expenditure indicates the marginal value for welfare. (Desai 2006: 17; Laderchi et al. 2006: 10 f.; Laderchi et al. 2003: 247 ff.; Wagle 2002: 156 ff.)

The World Bank developed in the 1990s an absolute international poverty line based on \$1 a day of income, 'purchasing power parities' (PPP) which increased to \$1.25 a day in 2005 (World Bank 2014). The basis is formed by the median of ten of the lowest national poverty lines in the world. Although it is the most widely recognized method for poverty measurement that is used as it creates an easy comparison possibility tool, it is also widely contested. (Laderchi et al. 2006: 10 f.; Laderchi et al. 2003: 247 ff.) The one dollar poverty line – as it is still called - is seen as inadequate, mono-dimensional and too low since it does not acknowledge any consideration of wellbeing or basic needs (Edward 2006: 14).

It is difficult to find a way to distinguish 'the poor' from 'the non-poor'. A person who lives with less than \$3 a day may also be considered as poor. In fact, national poverty lines would reflect poverty more as a relative concept but looking at one number rather than over 40 different ones seems to be more convenient for an overall assessment (Fukuda-Parr 2006: 7).

2) Capability Approach:

A turning point in poverty literature was reached through the capability approach (CA), pioneered by Amartya Sen in the 1980s. This method rejects monetary values as a measurement basis and defines poverty by human capabilities and freedoms (e.g., skills, physical abilities, self-respect in society, etc.) that are needed to live a valued life. Sen refers hereby to five key freedoms: dignity, economic facilities, social opportunities, political freedom, security and transparency guarantees. These freedoms or capabilities are reflected through a set of functionings or the ability to achieve these capabilities, depending on individual characteristics (i.e., metabolic rates, physical condition). The CA forms an alternative way of assessing well-being and criticizes the ethical foundations of utilitarianism. A standard of living is not defined over commodities that an individual possess but its individual achievements. Some individuals are not able to turn commodities into functionings to the same degree. Thus, when measuring a standard of living, rather the achievements of people should be targeted than the commodities that they possess. (Chambers 2006: 3; Fukuda-Parr 2006: 7 f.; Laderchi et al. 2006: 10 f.; Laderchi et al. 2003: 253 ff.; Wagle 2002: 158 f.)



However, there is no guideline provided of minimal essential capabilities that could serve as a universal list. Several scientists such as Sabina Alkire or Martha Nussbaum tried to define the characteristics of the essential capabilities required for a 'good life'. How can the capabilities be identified? For instance, Nussbaum lists a normal length of life, good health, adequate nutrition, imagination and thought, informed by education, critical reflection, etc. as features for wellbeing. (Laderchi et al. 2003: 253 ff.) But the definition of capabilities is a question of value judgment and depends on how they are prioritized by a society. (Alkire 2014a: 2) A country's economy might be an indicator therefore, yet '[t]here is no clear-cut formula for determining basic capabilities' (Kakwani 2006: 21).

The Human Developing Index (HDI) as well as the Human Poverty Index (HPI) developed by the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) in 1997 and the later replacement, the global Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI) developed by the Oxford Poverty and Human Development Initiative (OPHI) and UNDP in 2010, can be taken as examples for measurement tools that derived from the CA. The HPI which recognizes poverty as a multi-dimensional problem encompasses three dimensions to measure poverty (Mowafi 2004: 11): A short life, lack of basic education and private resources. The global MPI offers a more comprehensive conceptualization of multi-dimensional deprivation which captures 'human poverty' as different from 'income poverty' by focusing on the three dimensions education, health and living standard with ten indicators (i.e. child school attendance, nutrition or safe drinking water). A person is identified as multidimensional poor if he/she is deprived in at least one third of the MPI indicators. Although this approach incorporates a broader set of indicators, dimensions such as political freedom, security and transparency are still not included whereby a main obstacle is the lack of data. (Alkire 2014a: 2; Fukuda-Parr 2006: 7 f.; Mowafi 2004: 11 f.) Moreover, experts such as David Satterthwaite argue that the MPI leaves out important factors such as the constant risk of eviction or the lack of rule of law and neglects the significant difference between rural and urban poverty. The real deprivation of people in urban areas differs from the ones in rural areas in many ways, e.g., having a radio doesn't mean a person is not deprived. (Satterthwaite 2014)

3) *Social exclusion:*

The approach of social exclusion (SE), developed in industrial countries and diffused to the South in the 1990s, measures poverty by the process of marginalization and deprivation. SE is a tool that is also well applicable for rich countries as welfare provision is broad. Although this approach claims to be difficult to interpret, it contributes to the emergence and persistence of deprivation. Unlike the monetary and capability approach which are based on individual characteristics, the SE also takes into consideration the characteristics of a society and the marginalized groups (e.g., ethnic minorities). Some persons may have basic needs for survival (e.g., adequate consumption, shelter, income, etc.) but may still be poor by being excluded from mainstream economic, political, social or cultural activities that indicate a valued life and are hindered to acquire services that allow a social inclusion. Others may be excluded from citizenship rights or political equalities (e.g., participation in political processes) whereby especially those groups who are mainly affected by certain policies or programmes are not given voice to their needs and interests. Deprivation



can only be targeted by changing opportunities and outcomes of the socially excluded groups. An essential component of the SE is that it outlines the responsibility of the excluders towards those who are excluded. Problematic is hereby the application of SE in developing countries in view of the definition of 'normality' in these multi-polar societies. (Laderchi et al. 2006: 11; Laderchi et al. 2003: 257 ff.; Wagle 2002: 160 ff.) The measures of SE, however, could enhance the effectiveness of policies and contribute to a reduction of exclusion and poverty as well as to an identification of the causes and consequences of poverty. (Mathieson et al. 2008: 47)

The concept of SE is also embedded in European government policies as well as in policies by international agencies such as the International Labor Organization (ILO), United Nations or World Bank. For instance, since the Lisbon Summit in 2000, EU member states are required to develop a National Action Plan for 'Social Inclusion' that includes objectives such as facilitating participation in employment. (Levitas 2005: 123 f.)



4) Participatory approach:

The fourth approach is the participatory approach (PA) which targets to encourage people to participate in decisions about the meaning of poverty. This method has the advantage to generate views from the target groups themselves, instead of externally imposed perceptions. It is a way to give 'the poor' a voice in the poverty assessment and reduction process. The PA helps to define more appropriate indicators that are adjusted to each individual poverty situation. It is considered as more complex, multi-dimensional and cost-intensive. However, the outcomes of the PA reflect more accurate realities than via the monetary or capability approach. (Laderchi et al. 2006: 11)

In 1998 the World Bank conducted a three-part-study, the 'Voices of the Poor' or 'Consultations with the Poor' which aimed to collect views from poor people in different countries to share their concept of poverty. In the first publication "Can anyone hear us?" 78 participatory poverty assessments (PPA) reports based on studies from 47 different countries throughout the 1990s which focused on discussions with poor men and women and other stakeholders were analyzed. This study intended to give an insight into the experiences

with poverty from the perspective of poor people themselves and what actual deprivation means to them. One main obstacle in conducting this study was to gain trust from the poor communities in order to share their thoughts with governmental officials. Poverty was perceived as a multi-dimensional reality, referring mostly to lack of food, housing and land to meet their basic needs. Income was not seen as their main deprivation but psychological well-being factors such as powerlessness, helplessness, dependency, social exclusion and lack of voice. This was strongly linked with humiliation, rudeness and inhumane treatment by officials and social service workers. Moreover, participation and access to cultural events as well as basic infrastructure and access to health facilities were seen as factors of deprivation. (Mowafi 2004: 34 ff.; Narayan 1999: 6)



The challenge that can be identified hereby is how indicators for dimensions such as powerlessness can be created. Else Oyen notes that the poor do not understand the causes of poverty and are rather experts on their own life but not on poverty. She further outlines that the power forces that are constantly working against poverty reduction have to be targeted and questioned. (Mowafi 2004: 44 ff) Oyen has a reasonable point, although it is clear that the solution to poverty reduction is not a one-sided or mono-dimensional problem but requires the inclusion of different stakeholders. To understand the needs of poor communities as a decision-maker, it is necessary to incorporate views from the grassroots level. The poor people might not be able to comprehend the causes of their situation as a whole but can express their situation and help to define actual poverty realities.

The description of these four approaches emphasizes that in order to adequately define and measure poverty, a multi-dimensional approach that combines different perceptions and measurements is necessary. However, the difficulty is that each approach identifies different people as poor. But therefore the comparison of four assessment methods makes clear, how much the outcomes of these poverty measurements differ and that only one universal measurement tool can simply not be used. Policy-makers should spend time living in poor communities and learn to understand the conditions, needs and realities firsthand (Chambers 2006: 4). Bottom-up approaches and participatory working concepts are widely named in publications and studies but the non-existing consensus on poverty definition and measurement show that only the conventional tools are still in use. To include the perceptions of the poor may be more cost-intensive and time-consuming but in the long term, poverty reduction strategies would be more effective.



III. POVERTY ASSESSMENT: Rural Poverty vs. Urban Poverty

With natural population growth, rural to urban migration and reclassifications of rural to urban land, urbanization increased rapidly. But at the same time urban poverty grew due to conditions of overcrowded living, congestion, unemployment, higher competition, crime and violence and so on. The problems of urban poverty are not only attributed to constraints of resources and capacities but also to inadequate and poor planning for urban growth and management, causing several challenges and obstacles for many. Nowadays, half of the world's total population is living in cities whereby this number is expected to rise until 2030. (Baker 2008: 1) Over half of the world's 20 megacities are located in Asia and the Pacific, containing 42 percent of the total population (UN Habitat 2012). An estimated 78 percent of the poor are living in rural areas while the rural population is 58 percent of the population in developing countries (Olinto et al.: 5). However, according to World Bank estimations, about one third of all urban residents are considered as poor which is one quarter of the world's total poor. (Baker 2008: 1)

It has also to be taken in consideration where the line between rural and urban areas is drawn. Depending on each national government, the boundaries are set differently. According to the classifications and criteria that defines urban centers some countries would have bigger cities if e.g., peri-urban areas were recognized as urban. But also some classified urban centers lack economic, administrative and political aspects that are usually criteria for a city. (Satterthwaite 2002a: 15) Hence, the government decides where the urban poor are and how poor they are which makes poverty a political constructed problem. The phenomenon of urbanization is difficult to capture and the distinction between urban and rural land is becoming more and more blurred. Many countries use definitions that are based on population size and density but others also use multiple criteria, including urban employment, facilities (e.g., schools), infrastructure or administrative responsibilities. Experts suggest to go beyond the rural/urban distinctions towards more complex settlement differentiations and to treat urbanization less as a demographic but dynamic process. (McGranaham/Satterthwaite 2014: 7)

In the past two decades, the issue of urban poverty gained more attention in development research. Yet, mainstream poverty research still omits the fine differences between rural and urban poverty. Experts (Baker 2008; Satterthwaite 2004) claim that the urban poverty data is inaccurate and the used measurement indicators are not applicable for urban areas. Certainly there is more poverty in rural than in urban areas. But living conditions and daily struggles of the poor in cities are widely distinct from the rural poverty situation. Therefore there is a need to develop indicators, only for urban areas. (see Mitlin 2004; see Satterthwaite 2004)

What are the differences between urban and rural poverty? Urban poor residents may be considered as better-off as they may have greater cash incomes than in rural areas, but these may be also insufficient and insecure. Moreover living costs in cities, in particular for transport and housing are mostly higher than in rural areas. (UN Habitat 2012) Price levels differ, not only between rural and urban areas but also between urban centers. Since the middle and high income groups live mostly in urban areas, the average urban incomes are also higher than in rural areas. But this does not imply that the poorest urbanities have the same access to services. (Satterthwaite 2002a: 19)

'Proximity does not mean access' (ibid: 20): For instance, for a rural dweller the closest hospital may be 20 kilometers away from his/her house, but for an urban dweller the hospital may be only 50 meters away from his/her house and he/she can also not use it. Another example, water and sanitation facilities are said to be in a better condition in urban than in rural areas, but the conditions of this access are different and cannot be defined or measured in the same way. A rural settlement may have one water tap within 100 meters for 100 persons but an urban squatter settlement may have one tap for 5,000 people. (ibid) Thus, rural and urban areas face similar problems but under different conditions which is claimed to be recognized when poverty indicators are set.

Mono-dimensional poverty assessment

Even though it is acknowledged that poverty is multi-dimensional, the most common assessment tool used by national governments and international agencies is the monetary approach that is mono-dimensional and income- or consumption based. It is mainly criticized that the income-poverty line is not adequately adjusted to the urban realities and set too low in relation to the cost of living in urban areas. In particular non-food prices, e.g. housing, work, transportation from home to work, access to water and sanitation, health care, etc. are higher in cities than at the countryside. Moreover, non-income aspects of poverty, such as poor quality, insecure housing, lack of access to water, sanitation, health care, absence of rule of law and undemocratic, unrepresentative political systems which give poorer society groups no voice which characterize urban poverty more precise but are not reflected through the income-poverty line. (Satterthwaite 2002a: 21)

The single income-poverty lines that national governments have are usually used for rural and urban areas. This means that the income that is needed to escape poverty is the same for rural areas, cities and urban centers. Most income-poverty lines are bound to one minimum food basket with 15 to 30 percent of non-food needs, implying that non-food needs are not high. For poor rural dwellers this estimation may be correct, yet the living costs in urban areas are significantly higher whereby more than 30 percent of the in-

come is spend on non-food items. In particular for public transport (poor people live often in peripheral urban areas under poor conditions), schools, housing (especially tenant-households in illegal settlements pay mostly higher prices), access to water, sanitation and garbage collection, perhaps food, health care, energy (for cooking, heating and electricity) and child care. (ibid: 21 ff.) However, this should not mean that costs are always higher in the city but statistics can be wrong and the single poverty-line measurements understate the scale of poverty in urban areas.

What distinguishes urban poverty from rural poverty in view of the income poverty line? The main argument is that living costs are higher in cities than in rural areas, which is not recognized in the income poverty line. The income of rural people is usually much lower than that of urban residents which decreases the average income level. The latest comparable estimates of the \$1 poverty line date back to 2002. The World Bank stated that 283 million of the global poor live in urban areas with less than \$1 a day and 883 million in rural areas. If the poverty line was increased to \$2 a day, the number of urban poor would rise to 736 million but also the number of rural poor would reach 2,097 million. (UN Habitat 2012: 2) In Southeast Asia, the rural-urban is even more difficult to capture as many poor migrate back and forth between urban and rural areas, and many also receive their income from both rural and urban sources. (Gonzales 2012: 177)

Satterthwaite (Satterthwaite 2002b: 3; Mitlin 2004: 6) identifies eight key characteristics of urban poverty: Inadequate income (1), inadequate unstable or risky asset base (2), inadequate shelter (3), inadequate provision of public infrastructure (4), inadequate provision of basic services (5), limited or no safety net (6), inadequate protection of poorer groups' rights through the operation of law (7), and poorer groups' voicelessness and powerlessness (8). But measuring indicators such as political voice or rights may be difficult. Moreover, in urban areas, a higher variety of factors, such as daily dependence

on public infrastructure, higher exposure to pollution, greater reliance on cash income and houses as an economic resource and illegal solution, etc. convene and impact the emergence and development of urban poverty. Urban poverty has a widely multi-dimensional nature which is most visible by the slum and squatter settlements. According to UN-Habitat (2012), there are worldwide about 850 million urban dwellers living in slums and squatter settlements. (UN Habitat 2012: 2)



Multi-dimensional poverty assessment

The exclusive focus at income poverty is overlooking the underlying causes of vulnerability to poverty which are also affected by social and environmental dimensions. The HPI respective the global MPI tried to go beyond income poverty and focus on the actual people's needs for subsistence. The MPI, covering 100 developing countries, assesses the intensity of poverty at the household and individual level '[...] by directly measuring the overlapping deprivations poor people experience simultaneously' (Alkire et al. 2014a: 1). It uses micro data from household surveys from the USAID's Demographic and Health Survey (DHS), the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)'s Multiple Indicators Cluster Survey (MICS) and the World Health Organization (WHO)'s World Health Survey (WHS), plus six special surveys from urban areas. According to the MPI, a total of 1.6 billion people (2014) are living in multidimensional poverty whereby 52 percent live in South Asia. Moreover, 85 percent of the global MPI poor live in rural areas which is higher than the income poverty line estimates (70-75 percent). (Alkire et al. 2014a: 1 f.; see UNDP 2014)

It has to be taken into consideration that 71 percent of the MPI poor people live in Middle-Income Countries (MIC) and not in Low-Income Countries (LIC). (Alkire et al. 2014a: 1) However, also the international income poverty lines (by both \$1.25 and \$2 poverty lines) indicate that the world's poor largely live in MICs. The proportion of the world's \$1.25 and \$2 poor in MICs are 74 percent respective 79 percent. This implies that even if the common poverty line for developing countries is used, the outcome still indicates that more of the world's poor live in MICs. Half



of the world's poor live in India and China, one quarter in the remaining MICs (primarily Low Middle-Income Countries (LMIC) such as Pakistan, Nigeria and Indonesia) and a quarter (or less) lives in the remaining LICs. Hence, as Andy Sumner argues, in order to reduce poverty, the domestic resources of MICs need to be used more and donors need to change the objectives, instruments and allocation in giving foreign aid. (Sumner 2012: 2 f.)

Nevertheless, the MPI allows comparisons across countries, regions and the world as well as within countries by ethnic groups and urban or rural location. Alkire et al. stress that across all countries, rural areas have more MPI deprivations in electricity, water and flooring contribution (a household has a dirt, sand or dung floor) while urban areas have deprivations in child mortality, malnutrition and school attendance. (Alkire et al. 2014b: 3) It is being criticized that although the MPI may offer a more comprehensive measurement of poverty, the chosen indicators are still questionable as the death of a child and having a dirt floor, cooking with wood and not having a radio, TV, bike or car is recognized as equivalent valued. The problem is that there is no consensus how the multiple dimensions should be weighted to create an effective indicator. (see Green 2010a) Compared to the Millennium Development Goals (MDG) indicator for instance, a self-made millionaire who did not attend school would be considered as uneducated but with the MPI this would not be possible. (see Green 2000b)

In relation to urban poverty measurement, regardless of its general gaps, the MPI is considered as better applicable for rural poverty assessments as certain indicators, such as having a dirt, sand or dung floor, do not reflect urban deprivations accurately. Many urban poor settlements have concrete floors, yet this does not mean that they live in non-poor living conditions. Furthermore, having a radio for instance does not indicate that an urban dweller is not deprived. As mentioned before, urban populations face higher daily costs and e.g. need to pay for using



a toilet or washing facilities. They also live mostly in peripheral areas where they have to travel long distances to their workplace which is not considered in the MPI indicators. Experts such as Satterthwaite suggest to separate urban and rural assessment indicators. However, therefore better and more accurate local data is required. (see Satterthwaite 2014)

Inaccurate data

The lack of data is a huge problem for urban poverty assessment initiatives. Census and survey data, provided by the national governments, are widely inaccurate and incomplete. Population censuses are usually only conducted once a decade and comprises basic information about all citizens in a country, information on housing and basic service access, education level, and employment. Even though the data can be disaggregated into city, municipality, and neighborhood level, they do not contain information on income or consumption. Moreover, when a census is conducted, it is unsure if the responsible authorities are able to include all citizens as they may be reluctant to go into all informal settlement areas and incorporate those who are living in backhouses or on the street. Illegal settlements usually neither have maps, nor official addresses nor household records. Another option is to collect administrative data which could include more precise information on the location of facilities (e.g. schools, hospitals, public standpipes, etc.), costs and expenditure by sector and function, and so on. These information, however, are mostly difficult to store or access. In contrast, household survey data provide by creating a representative sample of the population more in-depth knowledge of living conditions. They are conducted on a national and city level, containing information on employment, income, household demographic situation, use of health facilities, and living standard, and so on. But household surveys are only a sample and useless if they do not identify where the deprived people actually live. (Baker/Schuler 2004: 8 f.; see Satterthwaite 2004)

Therefore, the given information on the living situation of urban dwellers is widely insufficient. Accurate data, however, are necessary to develop adequate assessment tools.

Participatory poverty assessment

Participatory assessments proved to gather more qualitative data on individual and community views. There are several tools that can be applied, e.g., focus groups, community meetings, community mapping or in-depth interviews. (Baker/Schuler 2004: 9 f.; see Satterthwaite 2004) Community mapping of informal settlements not only contributes to a better relation with local governments but also provides the necessary information base for poverty measurements. For instance, enumerations data that were collected by poor communities themselves could provide detailed information on the structure of each household and maps could serve as a basis to define the boundaries of all houses. (Mitlin et al. 2011: 9 f.) This participatory way of data collection is not only more cost-effective than compared to data collected by the local authorities but also more precise as the reflected poverty realities are more authentic. Furthermore, participatory assessments allow communities to be mobilized and contribute with their own plans (Satterthwaite 2002b: 27).

Which approach is appropriate?

The shown differences of rural and urban poverty point out that urban poverty has to be targeted separately, regardless of which measurement tool is used. But firstly, it has to be acknowledged by researchers as well as policy-decision makers that the conditions that distinguish them matter when it comes to develop poverty reduction strategies and city-planning measures. Poverty measurement tools need to go beyond income-based approaches. Poverty is multi-dimensional and differential. Poverty is dynamic, in particular urban poverty that is estimated to increase within the next years. Poverty indicators and measurement tools have to be dynamic as well. Even though indicators such as \$1 a day simplify comparisons across countries and regions, poverty reduction will not be tackled adequately. If the data basis is not accurate and does not reflect the reality of poverty, all policies and strategies to combat poverty and other issues in relation will not be effective – neither on a short-term nor on a long-term. There are plenty of good and well-conceived alternative approaches. It is necessary to shift the view from the macro to the micro level.

Among UN agencies, participatory approaches have been praised to be a new way to achieve better results in developing cooperation, yet the reality shows that these approaches have merely been implemented. It is more time consuming and takes also more patience to integrate the poor and their perspectives into poverty research measures. A reciprocal exchange of experiences and knowledge is required to create new ways of defining, measuring and reducing poverty. Due to the growing number of urbanities and associated urban challenges of housing, social fragmentation, infrastructure and natural hazards, urban poverty will gain more political attention in future. Governments regard poverty often mainly as a rural and not urban problem, as poverty alleviation policies focus more on rural than urban dwellers (Quingji/Dashu 2013: 13). The differences but also linkages of rural and urban poverty have to be taken into consideration and recognized when measurement tools are developed and poverty reduction measures set.



IV. URBANIZATION AND POVERTY IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

“Poverty is a chain; low education leads to poor employment; poor employment means low income, then no housing... then poverty.” (Group of officials in Ward 6, Go Vap District, HCMC cited in Thanh et al. 2013:17)

Nowadays, half of the world’s urban population lives in Asia. Since the 1960s Southeast Asia has experienced an immense population growth and rapid urban development. In the 1990s, geographical position, population size, resource endowment and respective levels of economic growth and industrialization contributed to high urbanization rates in Southeast Asian countries such as Singapore, Brunei and Malaysia. Rural economic depression and recession triggered a massive influx of migration from rural to urban areas. The capital cities of Southeast Asia are characteristic for an over-concentration of population. For instance, Bangkok has a population share of ten percent of the total Thai population, concentrates half of the country’s tertiary sectors and is the most important financial center of Thailand. This is mainly due to the city’s production capacity and economic structure. Urbanization creates economical development and delivers many employment possibilities with the image of a better life and a way out of poverty that attracts rural poor to migrate into cities. However, many rural migrants have only a low educational level that does not match the required qualifications and they live perhaps in an even more deprived environment than on the countryside. (see Qianqian 2013; see Quingji/Dashu 2013)

The situation of urban poverty differs from country to country as well as from city to city, depending on the cultural and historical background. Countries have different definitions for ‘urban’, different national political and policy frameworks, different levels of economic development and different cultural and living practices. (Gonzales 2012: 178) Many Southeast Asian cities are megacities, conglomerating all important economic sectors. Governments focused more on investments into the urban development and tended to neglect the development of rural areas. Notwithstanding that, the capacity of the cities was mostly not sufficient for the rapid rural exodus. Poor urban management planning resulted in deficient urban systems (water, energy, transport and housing) and less job opportunities which pushed many rural migrants into poverty. (see Qianqian 2013)

Mono-dimensional Poverty: \$1.25 a day poverty line

In view of income-based poverty estimations, the World Bank recognizes achievements in reducing poverty. Nevertheless, 36 percent (2008) of the South Asian and 14.3 percent (2008) of the East Asian and Pacific population continues to live below the \$1.25 a day poverty line (World Bank 2014). The global share of urban poor was 24.2 percent in 2002 and the proportion of the Southeast Asian population living in slums was 31 percent in

2012. (UN Habitat 2012) A low rate of job creation with a high rate of population growth forms one of the major reasons for urban poverty in Southeast Asia. Unemployment and informal employment rates stay high whereby Manila for instance showed the highest unemployment rate with 11.8 percent in 2002. Thereby, 51.3 percent of female Filipinas and merely 7.3 percent male Filipinos worked in the informal sector. (see Qianqian 2013)

In Thailand, over 43 percent of the urban poor lived below the \$1 poverty line in 1988 but ten years later, the number was almost halved, and dropped again to nine percent in 2011. (ibid) In view poverty reduction measures, Thailand as a MIC might show progress but it denies that poverty also exists beyond the threshold of the income poverty line. A female slum dweller of Pattaya in Central Thailand, for instance, might be able to generate 200 Baht a day (\$4) by collecting recyclable material, found in rubbish bins, however, this does not mean that she is not deprived as she lives in a shack, built with corrugated iron and plywood, and no running water. (see The Guardian 2011) Where poverty starts and where it ends has a decisive impact on poverty reduction policies and the selection of the potential beneficiaries.



As argued before, the \$1 poverty line shows several gaps and disadvantages for assessing poverty. Apart from the general critique that a mono-dimensional poverty line cannot reflect the actual poverty situation, the main objection in view of urban poverty is that although urban dwellers are considered to have higher income – if they are employed – the income poverty line is set too low as living costs in urban areas are also higher than in rural areas. The mono-dimensional indicator might be useful for comparisons across countries and regions but how is this helpful if many other dimensions of poverty are excluded?

Multi-dimensional Poverty Index

Assessing poverty as a multi-dimensional phenomenon, the MPI indicates that in Thailand 1.6 percent (2005/06) of the population lives in multi-dimensional poverty while in Vietnam 4.2 percent (2011) of the population is MPI poor, in the Philippines 13.4 percent (2008), in Indonesia 15.5 percent (2012), in Laos PDR 34.1 percent (2011/12) and in Cambodia 45.9 percent (2010). If further zoomed in the data show that Indonesia is deprived highest in health with 60.7 percent but relatively low in education with 12.6 percent. A similar finding is in the Philippines where 56.5 percent deprivations are concerned in health and 15.8 percent in education. The highest deprivation in education is found in the MIC country Thailand. Constant deprivation in all three dimensions between 30 and 40 percent is indicated for Laos PDR. The dimension of living standards however does not show deprivations below 26 percent or higher than 45 percent. (see OPHI 2014a) A complete comparison for Southeast Asia is not possible as there are no data available for Brunei, Myanmar, East Timor or Singapore.

The MPI allows analyzing more different facets of poverty, it measures the intensity of poverty and compares deprivations directly, but in view of urban poverty the chosen indicators are inappropriate. Comparing the results of the urban and rural MPI headcount ratio, urban MPI deprivation is in each Southeast Asian country significantly lower than rural deprivation. Duncan Green (2014) argues that many things come for free in rural areas but living costs in urban areas are higher wherefore urban poverty is higher for a given level of income. Even if urban poor have a higher income, their spending is higher as well. The used MPI indicators cannot be effective for urban poverty assessment since urban poor are deprived in different aspects or dimensions than rural poor. Notwithstanding that, the MPI moves one step away from the mono-dimensional poverty lines towards a more comprehensive poverty analysis.

Case study: Urban poverty assessment in Vietnam

In Vietnam, the national poverty line computed for 2012 that 17.2 percent of all Vietnamese are poor, the \$1.25 a day poverty line 16.9 percent and the \$2 a day poverty line 43.4 percent. The MPI, however, denoted only 4.2 percent as poor at the national level. For urban areas, multi-dimensional poverty is significantly lower than in rural areas. It has to be noted that about 70 percent of the total population lives on the countryside in Vietnam. (see OPHI 2014b) These results show that income poverty is almost four times higher than multi-dimensional poverty, and even higher if the poverty line is set at \$2 a day. But, considering that the highest percentage of the Vietnamese population is rural where

people may be more deprived in income but less in sanitation or housing, the MPI seems not to be suitable for urban poverty as urban Vietnamese are deprived in different dimensions than the global MPI includes.

In three studies that are addressing the gap in data on urban poverty and the thereby resulting difficulties in poverty measurement, carried out by the UK's Department for International Development (DFID) and by the Asian Trends Monitoring (ATM) initiative, the low relevance of income poverty for urban poverty measurement is shown. One of the DFID funded studies, conducting participatory monitoring on urban poverty, was inquiring the voices of the local people on multi-dimensional poverty and their capacity to risks and shocks. Between 2008 and 2012, the executing organizations OXFAM, Action Aid Viet Nam (AAV) and local partners, undertook the monitoring project in the three cities of Hanoi, Hai Phong and Ho Chi Minh City (HCMC). Compromising three communes or wards and six residential quarters that are considered as areas of urban poverty with migrant population, the study assessed the awareness of about 500 people and their changing lives, perceptions of inequality and socialization, their dimensions of urban poverty (i.e., lack of labor and skills, lack of capacity to find alternative livelihoods, lack of social capital, lack of access to public services, and uncomfortable and unsafe living), and poverty related to migrants working in informal sectors. (Thanh et al. 2013: 8)

It has to be taken into consideration that in Vietnam each city is authorized to define its own poverty line based on the local cost of living and the people's standard of living, as long as it is not lower than the government's national poverty line. This implies that if in two cities the costs of living are the same and one city set its poverty line much lower, the poverty situation in that city is not reflected according to its reality (AAV/OXFAM 2012: 10) The study found that out of the five dimension of deprivations, lack of labor was the most prominent feature of urban poor households in 2008 and lack of capacity to find alternative livelihoods in 2012. (ibid: 21)

Another DFID funded study which was conducted by the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) in collaboration with Hanoi and HCMC in 2009 also analyzed multi-dimensional characteristics of the urban poor, focusing on employment, earnings and "consumer durables" (e.g., televisions, motorbikes or mobile phones). For this study the poverty situation of a total of 3349 households and individuals was measured in eight dimensions of deprivation (i.e., income, education, health care, access to the social system, housing quality and space, housing services, participation in social activities and social security). It was found that in both cities, the three top deprivations are access to social security (receiving any benefits from work or pension or regular social allowance),

access to proper housing services (i.e., electricity, water, sewage drains, and waste disposal services), and access to dwellings of decent quality and size. The dimension of deprivation that was lowest, however, was income. (Thanh et al. 2013: 9; UNDP 2010: 18 f.)

The results of both two studies show that income deprivation is not the most important dimension reflecting the multi-dimensional poverty situation in Vietnam's cities. Even if the number of deprivation increases the importance of income remains unchanged. They find that deprivations in the capacity to find alternative livelihoods, social security, and housing quality and space are rated higher, unlike the global MPI which finds that the highest multi-dimensional deprivation is in the years of schooling and school attendance. (see OPHI 2014b) On the contrary, the UNDP study denotes deprivation in education, in particular in Hanoi, as significantly lower than other dimensions. Therefore dimensions such as social security and the capacity of finding alternative livelihoods should be additional indicators to the MPI for Vietnam. The assessment of risks and shocks in the AVV/OXFAM study such as the vulnerability to price changes reveals that the gained information are distinctive for policy-makers to acknowledge.

It can also be concluded that since already in the comparison of two national cities, Hanoi and HCMC, the dimensions of deprivation have different intensities, a more city customized measurement tool needs to be applied to generate realistic outcomes. Moreover, the studies outline the importance of detailed data, for instance, the shown lack of social security proves to be an essential factor to be considered in the development of poverty reduction programmes and policies. The application respective the establishment of a regular multi-dimensional poverty measurement system is required, as a complement to the income-based system.

Case study: Urban poverty assessment in Lao PDR

The data on urban poverty measurements in Lao PDR are very limited. A working paper by the Asian Development Bank (ADB) presents the outcomes of a PPA study that has been conducted with 500 households in Vientiane in 2001. At that time, poverty was only seen as a rural phenomenon and urban poor dwellers remained more in hidden pockets throughout the city. But the Asian Trends Monitoring survey study which inquired Vientiane's people's satisfaction with their life indicates that even in 2012, urban poverty has not yet been acknowledged or defined, as Vientiane is only a slowly growing city and has no industry that would attract migration from the rural areas. The urban dwellers are also still tightly interlinked with the rural life and maintain the connection. Moreover, urban poor dwellers are confronted with environmental hazards as the majority of them live in the wetland low-lying areas (see Plummer 2001; see Asian Trends Monitoring 2012)

The ADB study that was seeking to describe the nature of poverty in Vientiane and the livelihoods of different types of poor people finds that in 2001 the constant flooding and inadequate drainage, followed by lack of sanitation facilities and sewerage are primary problems. Hereby, out of eight central problem areas, low household incomes, lack of jobs and vocational training are the least important issues. (Plummer 2001: 29) The Asian Trends Monitoring study, however, stresses that in 2012 finding work opportunities is the top difficulty which is the same outcome as in the AVV/OXFAM study for Vietnam. (Asian Trends Monitoring 2012: 11) It can be concluded that throughout ten years, the poverty situation and the needs of the urban dwellers has changed from environmental and sanitary issues towards lack of work opportunities. Yet it has to be noted that the study from 2012 did not include issues into the survey concerning environmental problems.

A PPA is especially in Vientiane effective which is compared to other Southeast Asian cities a relative small city with a total population of only 800,000 people. The global MPI, for instance, shows that urban areas in Lao PDR are deprived most in child mortality. A poverty dimension such as, finding job opportunities, is not included in the MPI indicators but would be an asset to the measurement tool as also found in the case study of Vietnam. An assessment tool that is rather country specific and that also takes the poor's personal perspective of poverty into consideration, proves to generate more precise descriptions of poverty realities in Lao PDR.

V. URBAN POVERTY ASSESSMENT: GAPS AND CHALLENGES

What is the most appropriate approach to assess urban poverty? The \$1 poverty line, the MPI as well as participatory assessments all show several gaps that make an adequate measurement of urban poverty more difficult. The \$1 poverty line is said to be set too low, one number cannot reflect poverty as a whole and underestimates the scale of poverty as higher living costs in urban areas are not recognized. The MPI may focus more on achievements than possessions but still leaves out dimensions such as political freedom, security or transparency. In view of urban poverty, the MPI misses to include dimensions such as the constant risk of eviction, lack of rule of law and denies the significant difference between rural and urban poverty conditions. Participatory assessments are considered to be too cost-intensive and time-consuming.

To draw the line between poor and non-poor, it is necessary to consider what poverty is. A definition of poverty depends on the eye of the beholder. Are these the poor themselves, the society, politicians or external scientists? Who understands the meaning of poverty truly?

The reality is that there is no clear-cut formula. That is the challenge. A universalization of all poverty situations appears to be impossible. Life, people, cultures, the whole world is full of diversity. The centralized view on poverty has to be refused. Of course researchers know this but politics and economy still claim numbers. A great challenge is the lack of accurate data which is rather a problem of lack of political will. Censuses are conducted only once every ten years and survey data provide merely samples. Most poverty researchers stress that poverty assessment indicators not only need to be build up on top-down views but also on grassroots understandings of poverty. The affected people should be able to reflect their real needs and living conditions while researchers and decision-makers can connect the causes of poverty and its global linkages.

Different poverty measurement approaches have distinct outcomes on what poverty is. One approach, however, is not applicable for all countries, regions, communities or situations. In the end a subjective decision has to be made for each country individually. But who will be the decision-maker? Moreover, the differences and the linkages of rural and urban poverty have to be accepted and recognized, especially by policy-makers and international institutions.

VI. CONCLUSION

Defining the meaning of a good life is the major challenge in assessing poverty. However, perceptions on the aspects of a good life vary. Throughout the past two centuries, several scientists tried to conceptualize, define and seek the most appropriate approach to describe poverty. Did they all fail?

In an era of neo-liberalism where economy dictates politics the regulation of the society it is more likely to measure poverty over economical indicators such as income. That poverty is not only a mono-dimensional but multi-dimensional phenomenon is already broadly acknowledged as the implementation of assessment tools such as the MPI show. Notwithstanding that, international income-based poverty lines are dominating, and in view of urban poverty the real scale of deprivation is disguised. Although rural poverty is higher, urban mismanagement of city planners and weak political engagement resulted in growing urban poverty. Especially megacities in Southeast Asia have difficulties in addressing urban poverty adequately as poverty has multiple intertwined facets.

This essay found that the prevailing poverty assessment indicators show not only gaps in reflecting the actual extent of poverty but are in particular misleading for the measurement of urban poverty. The \$1 poverty line implies that the causes of poverty lie

mainly in the inability to afford sufficient food although urban dwellers mostly have higher non-food expenditures as computed by the indicator. The MPI incorporates poverty dimensions that are applicable for rural but not for urban living conditions. Experts claim that assessment tools need to recognize the distinction and the linkages of deprivation in rural and urban areas in order to develop effective measurement tools.

Nevertheless, the aspiration to universalize poverty assessment tools may be unrewarding. Laderchi et al. (2006) are hereby suggesting the usage of a multi-dimensional approach that measures poverty by combining four different assessment tools. The difficulty with this approach is that each measurement tool identifies different people as poor. However, the varied results point out that a universalization of poverty assessment is not possible. A stronger incorporation of the poor themselves is necessary as the prevailing assessment tools do not reflect the real poverty situations.

The greatest problem for urban poverty assessment in Southeast Asia is not only the inappropriate indicators but also the lack of accurate data on the population number and the deprived people's living conditions. Census and surveys are not comprehensive enough. Satterthwaite (2004) claims that deprived communities should be more included for the data collection and authorities should make use of their existing networks and associations. Even though authorities consider participatory approaches as more time-consuming and cost-intensive, it would be one step further to capture the real situation of poverty and to develop poverty reduction policies that are addressing the actual needs of the poor.



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