

Introductory Editorial

Marco Zupi

International University of Bac Ha, Hanoi and Centro Studi di Politica Internazionale of Rome

Correspondance: marco.zupi@cespi.it

Over the last decades, the fight against poverty seems to be at the top of the international political agenda. International civil society, academic, business and political communities have shared a common interest in fighting poverty, at least with a large amount of speeches, documents and a lot of rhetoric.

Facts and statistics on world poverty are plentiful. In many cases, however, data are estimates where caution should be exercised.

All available data are very useful to define an appropriate political strategy against poverty, but the problems of data reliability in terms of the consistency of the collected data, the precision of measurement and the information directly related to the phenomenon under investigation and to policies to be scrutinized cannot be underestimated. Available data do not provide a complete characterization of the conditions of the poor.

Not only do these numbers - whether measured by income levels, literacy rates, infant mortality rates, or other gauges of personal welfare - fail to capture the concrete meaning of poverty, but many who perceive them as inaccurate have also considered them as false measures to assess policy effectiveness.

The results of policy policies and actions on poverty reduction (and poverty eradication, by adopting the objective put forward by the Sustainable Development Goals set up in 2015, to replace the Millennium Development Goals set up in 2000) have been mixed so far. Poverty has been reduced mainly in East and South Asia, but it has practically remained unchanged in other regions and has in fact deepened in some of them, particularly in Sub-Saharan Africa. This is producing more inequality in world regional development.

Notwithstanding this criticism, it is beyond doubt that a new policy focus should translate into concrete actions and new approaches have emerged on the matter. National and international policies to fight poverty are often conceived as strategies to ensure that those who are poor or at risk of poverty and social exclusion gain the opportunities and resources necessary to participate fully in economic, social and cultural life and to enjoy a standard of living and well-being that is considered normal in the society in which they live. It should ensure that they have greater participation in decision-making, which affects their lives and access to their fundamental rights. Actions focused on creating economic development and employment, and on strengthening institutional capacity must be linked to the concrete opportunities and advantages for the poor and their capacities, if they are really poverty reduction-oriented.

Thus pro-poor economic and social policies must be complementary and equally significant components of policies to fight against poverty. Obviously, there is some arbitrariness in any classification of this type, used for heuristic purposes. Moreover, very challenging specific and additional methodological problems arise when it comes to policy impact analysis, by determining whether changes in outcomes can be attributed to the given policy.

In retrospect, compared to more traditional approaches to social policies to assist the poor, conditional cash transfers are a pretty recent phenomenon. The basic idea of these new programs classified as conditional cash transfers is to provide money to poor families contingent upon specific behavior, such as sending children to school or bringing them to health centers on a regular basis. The underlying belief is always that the mere fact of providing money is not sufficient to improve welfare condition in the poor population concerned if there is no investment in human capital (basically, in health and education services) among the poor. The first generation of such programs was implemented in Latin America, with *Bolsa Escola* (then renamed *Bolsa Família*) in Brazil being one of the "pioneers" of cash transfers conditioned upon enrollment in school and vaccinations of the school-aged children in the 1990s. Another famous "old" large-scale conditional cash transfer program was *Progresa* (then renamed *Oportunidades*) in Mexico. Evaluation results showed that conditional cash transfers in Latin America provided effective incentives for investing in the poor's human capital. As the years passed, a few examples of conditional cash transfers programs were introduced in Africa as well and the preliminary evaluation showed that contextual limitations in terms of infrastructure, education and health systems may drastically limit the benefits of such programs.

For these reasons and given the frequency with which the given approach was adopted in many other countries, combining domestically funded national programmes and donor-funded initiatives (such as the FAO programs inspired by the Brazilian general director, José Graziano da Silva, who designed and led the *Zero Hunger, Fome Zero*, in Brazil) what is done with the article written by Chrispine Kalungulu and Venkatesh Seshamani is very interesting. The authors document the evidence base on cash transfers in Malawi and observe the effect of such programs in the country through the analytical tool of the classical linear regression model, the method of ordinary least squares (OLS) and the usage of a Probit model as a robustness check. Based on data from the third Integrated Household Survey (IHS) of 2011, the authors show that social cash transfer programs have no significant effect on poverty in Malawi and they reflect on the development of social protection policies in the country by proposing possible policy interventions that can help to improve effectiveness of social welfare interventions in Malawi.

The so called social stratification is another key issue of poverty diagnosis and analysis. Population is divided in social strata or classes and this structural segmentation of society leads to social distance (different social position of people) and different opportunities for different groups, which results in a

poverty trap for the poor. The poor are located at the lower end of various distributions of economic, social, political, cultural and environmental resources. Thereafter, poverty is structurally conditioned by people economic position and social relationship, rather than by their intrinsic capacities. A key discrimination on the role assigned to the home, labor market and society requires gender considerations in studying poverty.

Fouzi Mourji and Abdeljaouad Ezzrari are the authors of the article focused on describing and analyzing the situation of women in Morocco, through the different stages of life. By using economic tools and data collected through surveys published by the High Commission for Planning (HCP), the authors analyze similarities and differences between boys and girls concerning education and health (human capital endowments) to understand whether the early stage of life offers equal opportunities in the first part of the article. Then they analyze the situation of men and women in the labor market, in terms of their participation and time management, to discuss gender inequality in Morocco further. In the following part of the article, the authors focus on the differential poverty risk facing female- and male-headed households, both during and after working age. A discussion of the value of women's domestic work, looking at different possible modes of "compensation", concludes the article.

Latif Dramani is the author of the article on women's primary role assigned to the home "domestic production", one of the most illustrative examples of social stratification and discrimination in terms of gender division of labor, of key importance in understanding poverty and inequality. Women's inferior position, rights and payment (if not lack of payment) is clear in analyzing work within the home, which is often unpaid and not included in the calculation of households' living standards. The author uses data from the Survey of poverty in Senegal (ESPS II) - 2011 and the National Time Transfer Account (NTTA) methodology to measure the time spent on domestic activities. The results show that the difference between women and men in time spent on domestic work is impressive and women's work within the home prevent them from pursuing participation in the paid labor market in a proportion similar to men. These results confirm the existence of an implicit trade-off in households between domestic and paid work in Senegal and this is a point on which there is room for reflection on the rights implication, as this stratification does not confer the same kind of rights and benefits usually offered with paid labor market, but also on the future of domestic work in Senegal and, more generally, in Africa.

By default, poverty reduction and eradication is now considered the core mission and main motivation of international aid policies; however international aid policy tells a different story. As the international context was dominated by the Cold War and the main priority for the Western bloc was to fight against Communism, from the 1950s to the 1980s international aid policy had a clear rationale over all the other motivations, that is the security/strategic interest to limit a Soviet expansion. Acceptable or not as the main priority, this security/strategic concern legitimated international aid policy as part of foreign policy interested to promote peace and security and provided it with a strong

commitment. As a consequence of this strong political commitment, poverty reduction was one of the objectives of concrete projects and programs to implement international aid initiatives.

The ruling idea became the view that development was equal to growth in GDP per capita and capital accumulation was the key to prosperity, and this will come about through industrialization, based on a combination of increased saving (domestic and international saving, through international aid and external debt) to be transformed into productive investment through the transfer of Western finance, science and technology, and economic management by governments. Thus, accelerating economic growth was the basic engine to overcome poverty. The dominant economic theory claimed that the mechanisms of a competitive market automatically guarantee that long-term growth follows the path of continuous full employment. Bilateral and multilateral aid organizations translated this simple and easily understandable idea into aid focused on physical investment (machinery, equipment and other intermediate good imports) as well as big infrastructure projects (dams, roads, railways etc.). This inspiring vision has never changed and more than anything, some additional and heterogeneous dimensions of capital have been included in the process of capital accumulation in order to describe in detail, with scientific precision, the process of economic growth. And this vision has been used to prove the necessity of aid for poor countries by Investing in human capital (education, health, research and development as a way to increase skills, improve labor productivity and induce technological innovations), social capital (institutions, social norms of trust and reciprocity among different actors, formal and informal relational goods, which can create a favorable environment to make investment more productive and efficient through a direct support to the private sector and NGOs), knowledge capital (in particular, with reference to Information and Communication Technology and the need to become a dynamic and competitive knowledge-based economy), institutional capital (provided that institutions do matter a lot, the purpose is to promote democratization process, the rule of law, war on corruption, decentralization of political power and administration, high quality and managerial skills of organizations and public administration, capacity development and institution building), and natural capital (assuming environment as a cross-cutting dimension or a mainstream in development process, which can be adequately assessed only in the inter-generational perspective of the so-called sustainable development).

During the last sixty years, international ODA has been funding infrastructure projects, social expenditures (particularly, basic health and education), training activities (with technical assistance), private sector development, good governance, and sustainable development projects. Clearly this approach has represented a more flexible and indirect “pro-poor” strategy, based on a trickle-down effect, rather than a policy directly focused on addressing the need identified by the web of deprivations.

Given the renewed interest in effectiveness, impact and results of policies, there are many issues related to international aid that deserve particular attention.

Marco Zupi is the author of the article focused on the limitation of the standard Project Cycle Management (PCM) and Logical Framework (LF) tools. The new views on poverty and development, multidimensionality and complexity of change should require an updated and correlated tools to design interventions and to think and monitor transformation and effects. There are many new key concepts, such as resilience, adaptation, equity, access and empowerment, that are essential for thinking about development and poverty reduction today, but the typical practical tool to project design remains substantially unaltered. After mentioning some critiques to the logic of PCM, the author provides some inputs on possible complementary and alternative approaches to project design, implementation and evaluation.

This issue of the e-Journal is inaugurating a new section that contains articles written by young researchers, PhD students and Post-doc scholars who are affiliated to a new African, Asian and Latin American International Doctoral Network on Development and Global Studies focused on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). A network to link several academic graduate and PhD programs that already exist in many African, Asian and Latin American countries; a South-South connection through which important research fields, relevant to the SDGs agenda, are in-depth studied in an international dialogue, exchanging ideas and results. This network is conceived as a practical way to develop a community of young researchers, which is a process of mutual learning by strengthening links among them, with the opportunity to provide them with scholarships to spend some months abroad.

Ana Paula Nunes Lopes Garcia opens this new section with an article that discusses another key topic linked to the specific nature of the international aid “sector” and related to the gender gap, which is gender-based violence (GBV). A recent sexual exploitation scandal involving Oxfam staff in Haiti has publicly revealed the facts of violations during peacekeeping operations, representing a known problem in the international aid sector, more frequently in conflict and post-conflict areas with some cases also in the context of development projects. A problem that was not addressed properly by International organizations and NGOs, with the World Bank and the UN that started increasing investigation and prevention of sexual exploitation and abuse (SEA) cases. The author underlines the problem of using local contractors and national consultants outside of the international agency’s supervision and the importance of prevention and investigation on SEA, by proposing some recommendations on how to include SEA provisions in procurement documents, reinforce monitoring and facilitate reporting.

Also the concluding chapter, written by Soheila Heidari and Alireza Khosravi, is directly linked to the International Doctoral Schools’ Network on the SDG. The authors analyze one of the most powerful tools in the world: the Internet. In particular, the dependency on web-based information through search engines, service providers, websites and social media in the minds of the billions of users is impressive. By applying the reader-response theory, a critical theory conceived to describe what happens when readers and text come together, the

authors seek to focus on the challenges stemming from the adoption of users' personalized profiles by Google, Facebook and Amazon as the most common part of users' performance in internet. The new information and communication technology is a source of extraordinary opportunity but there is also the risk of worsening social distance and inequalities (the so called digital divide) and personal profiling made through the use of social media and search engines is a concrete example of potential in-betweenness of the tools' perception of users and the users' own perception of themselves.