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2014Mobilizing critical research for  
preventing and eradicating poverty**THE INDIVIDUAL DEPRIVATION MEASURE:  
A NEW APPROACH TO MULTI-DIMENSIONAL,  
GENDER SENSITIVE POVERTY MEASUREMENT**

by Sharon Bessell

This poverty brief argues:

- Existing measures of poverty are not sensitive to gender and suffer from (at least) three limitations:
  1. They use the household, rather than the individual, as the unit of analysis. This masks inequalities in the intra-household distribution of resources and burdens, resulting in inadequate understanding of gendered poverty.
  2. They rely on existing data sources, which are often gender blind, limiting the potential for understanding the gendered nature of poverty.
  3. The dimensions of poverty to be measured are determined by experts, rather than being grounded in the priorities and experiences of those who have experienced poverty.
- The Individual Deprivation Measure (IDM) offers a new way of measuring poverty that takes the individual as the unit of analysis and is grounded in research with people who have experienced poverty in eighteen communities across six countries.
- The IDM is able to illuminate differences in the extent and nature of poverty at the individual level, revealing gendered differences, as well as other crucial differences between individuals.
- The nuanced and individualised information provided by the IDM provides the basis for anti-poverty policies that are able to respond to *specific* groups within a broader population and *specific* issues.
- The IDM is applicable at local level through to national and global levels.

How we measure poverty matters. Determining the number of people in poverty, and their geographic location and social circumstances, is vital if policies and services are to respond appropriately. Tracking the number of people in poverty, as well as those close to poverty and those who move out of or fall into poverty, reveals the success—or failure—of efforts to overcome poverty. Being able to accurately measure how poverty impacts differently on women and men, and on individuals of different ages, matters greatly. Almost two decades ago, the Beijing Platform for Action identified the ‘persistent and increasing burden of poverty on women’ as an issue of critical global concern. Yet as Chant (2010: 2) observes, the ‘task of converting the goal of reducing gendered poverty into actual results is far from straightforward’. That women and men experience poverty differently is well-established (Nussbaum, 2000; Narayan et al, 2000; Chant, 2007), but these differences are often hidden or neglected when we focus on household poverty. We know, too, that gendered experiences of poverty are shaped by a range of factors, of which age or stage within the life-course is particularly significant. Jones et al (2010) highlight the ways in which ‘overlapping and intersecting experiences of deprivation, foregone human development opportunities and abuse or exploitation serve to perpetuate and intensify poverty for girls and women over the life-course’. To respond adequately to poverty, policies need to take account of how poverty intersects with a range of individual characteristics, including gender, generation and geographic location. Yet, the *measurement* of poverty is often insensitive to gender and to other differences (see Bessell, 2010).

Debates about how poverty should be measured are by no means new (Pogge, 2004; Anand et al, 2010). The advantages and disadvantages of income-based versus multi-dimensional measures have raged for more than two decades, with a growing recognition that poverty encompasses more than income alone (Sen, 1999; Nussbaum, 2000; Alkire and Santos, 2013). Yet, as we move towards more sophisticated ways of understanding and measuring poverty, serious problems remain with existing measures. Three issues are of particular concern: the

household, rather than the individual, is generally the unit of analysis; too often what is measured is what we already have data on; and determination of the dimensions of poverty that should be subject to measurement is largely the preserve of experts.

Over the past four years, an international, interdisciplinary team, funded by an Australian Research Council Linkage Grant, has worked towards reconceptualising the way in which poverty is measured. The research project was carried out over three phases. The first involved research in eighteen communities across six countries using participatory principles to gain insights into how people who have experienced poverty think poverty should be measured. The second phase involved the development and testing of candidate dimensions that

should make up a just and justifiable measure of poverty. The final phase involved testing in the Philippines the measure developed from the research project. The result is the Individual Deprivation Measure (IDM), a gender-sensitive approach to measuring poverty that aims to overcome the problems that confound existing measures.

## The Individual Deprivation Measure

The Individual Deprivation Measure is based on 15 dimensions of material and social deprivation that our research identified as comprising poverty. The 15 dimensions and the associated indicators are provided in table 1.<sup>1</sup>

**Table 1**

Dimension	Indicators
<b>Food/Nutrition</b>	Hunger in the last 4 weeks
<b>Water</b>	Water source, water quality
<b>Shelter</b>	Durable housing; Homelessness
<b>Health Care/Health</b>	Health status, health care access; For women who are pregnant or have been pregnant in the past 3 years, access to pre-natal care, trained health care worker in attendance at birth
<b>Education</b>	Years of schooling completed; Basic literacy and numeracy
<b>Energy/Cooking Fuel</b>	Source of cooking fuel; Health impacts; Access to electricity
<b>Sanitation</b>	Primary toilet, secondary toilet
<b>Family Relations</b>	Control of decision making in household; Supportive relationships
<b>Clothing/Personal Care</b>	Protection from elements; Ability to present oneself in a way that is socially acceptable
<b>Violence</b>	Violence (including sexual and physical violence) experienced in the last 12 months; Perceived risk of violence in the next 6 months
<b>Family Planning</b>	Access to reliable, safe contraception; Control over use of contraception
<b>Environment</b>	Exposure to environmental harms that can affect health, well-being and livelihood prospects
<b>Voice</b>	Ability to participate in public decision making in the community; Ability to influence change at community level
<b>Time-use</b>	Labour burden; Leisure time
<b>Work</b>	Status of and respect in paid and unpaid work; Safety and risk in relation to paid and unpaid work

(adapted from 'Lifting the lid on the household: Introducing the Individual Deprivation Measure, [www.gendermatters.org](http://www.gendermatters.org))

In a survey taking approximately one hour to administer, an individual's status in each dimension is assessed using a set of questions designed to reveal the existence and level of deprivation according to the indicators in table 1. The IDM does not include financial deprivation, but it is clearly central to measuring poverty. Thus, we recommend that an individual's status be tracked on two axes of achievement, taking account of financial and multi-dimensional deprivation. Here we follow the recently debuted Mexican multidimensional poverty measure. Financial deprivation is plotted on the *y* axis and multi-dimensional poverty—determined by the IDM—is plotted on the *x* axis, thus identifying an person's status according to financial deprivation and individual, multi-dimensional deprivation.

The IDM is scalar and is capable not only of identifying an individual's overall level of poverty, but of revealing an individual's level of poverty in specific dimensions. This provides the information needed to develop anti-poverty policies and interventions that are able to genuinely respond to specific groups within a broader population, to specific issues, or in specific geographic regions.

In its conceptualisation and development, the Individual Deprivation Measure is distinct from other measures of poverty in three important ways:

### **Taking the priorities of the poor seriously**

First, the measure is grounded in research carried out by local research teams in Angola, Fiji, Indonesia, Malawi, Mozambique and the Philippines. While there is a wealth of literature exploring causes, experiences and impacts of poverty, our review of the literature revealed no comprehensive studies of how the poor think poverty should be *measured*. The first, qualitative, phase of the project used participatory research principles and methods to explore, with women and men across the life cycle, what constitutes poverty, how sex and age determines the constitution of poverty, and whether there are different levels of poverty. This phase of the research focused on what dimensions of poverty participants considered important for policy makers to recognise and understand in order to effectively combat poverty. The research was carried out in three sites in each country, one urban, one rural and one highly marginalised. Marginalised sites were identified in close collaboration with local research teams, based not on their geographic location but according to the social exclusion and discrimination faced by the people living in those communities. This phase of the research illuminated the differences (as well as the similarities) in women's and men's perspectives and priorities. It also revealed the ways in which a multi-dimensional measure of poverty can be sensitive to both gender and generation.

Based on the analysis of the qualitative research and an extensive review of the relevant literature and existing measures, we identified 25 dimensions of poverty, each of which was a candidate for a gender-sensitive measure. Research teams then returned to all sites to ask

participants to respond to and rank the dimensions, and also to identify important dimensions that were not on the list of 25. As in phase one, the phase two research was structured around sex and age, with the number of participants increasing to 1800 across the eighteen sites.

From phase two, we developed a measure of deprivation comprising fifteen dimensions. The final fifteen dimensions were those most commonly identified by participants across sites and countries and those identified from the literature review or by participants as particularly important in uncovering gendered poverty. Pre-testing for this phase found that while participants tended to have strong views for dimensions they considered to be a high priority in the measurement of poverty, they did not have strong views on the relative priority of the dimensions at the bottom of the list. For example, in phase one, both freedom from the disruptive behaviour of other people and spending on discretionary items were identified as important, but were not prioritised in phase two. By contrast, food or adequate nutrition, water and shelter consistently received a high ranking by the majority of participants across sites in phase two.

The resulting Individual Deprivation Measure not only relies on expert knowledge developed over decades of research and debate about poverty measurement, but is grounded in the views and experiences of those who have lived and experienced poverty. The participatory nature of the development of the Individual Deprivation Measure is a remarkable strength shared by few existing mainstream measures of poverty. In the past, participatory methodologies have been used very effectively to understand the extent and nature of poverty at the local level (see for example Chambers, 1994). Such participatory appraisals are important in revealing the extent and nature of poverty in a specific area, and often highlight and reflect local perceptions of poverty. However, the findings are often difficult to generalise. Poverty measurement on a large scale has tended to rely on high level data on income, health or education gathered through censuses and household or labour force surveys. Such approaches produce statistically significant results and provide important insights into broad trends. However, they are often unable to reveal nuance and context. The Individual Deprivation Measures offers an alternative to either small-scale, local and highly contextualised assessments of poverty *or* measures based on large scale data sets that have no participatory element.<sup>2</sup>

### **The individual as the unit of analysis**

The second important and distinctive feature of the Individual Deprivation Measure is the identification of the individual, not the household, as the unit of analysis. Couched in feminist principles, this research began with recognition of the ways in which measures of household poverty mask intra-household distribution (see Jaggar and Wisor, 2014). The Individual Deprivation Measure provides a means of measuring, at the individual level, in order to reveal the extent and nature of poverty experienced *within*

households and offers a means of tracking change for each individual. It is important to emphasise that in moving to the individual as the unit of analysis, we do not imply that the household is unimportant. In several communities during the first phase of the research, we heard from participants that if a household is poor, everyone is poor. We heard, as other research has documented (ie: Chant, 1994; Heltberg et al, 2013), about the survival strategies of households. Yet, we also heard that poverty plays out differently according to one's place in the household and of the very different burdens that fall to different individuals. Our aim is not to dismiss the significance of the household, but to illuminate the poverty of *individuals* within the household as the basis for effective interventions. As we move from the household to the individual as the unit of analysis, the centrality of gender in shaping experiences and burdens of poverty is clearly apparent. It is also clear that while gender differences are universally important to the way poverty is experienced, gender plays out differently across contexts—including across different households and household-types.

### **Considering New Sources of Data**

The third feature of the Individual Deprivation Measure is the development of a survey-based multi-dimensional poverty measure that moves beyond the limitations of existing data. Current measures of poverty, for understandable reasons, rely on existing data sources. However, they sources are often inadequate to measure the dimensions of poverty that matter most to people. So long as we remain limited by existing data sources, we are destined to remain limited in our understanding of poverty and limited in our responses. Very importantly, while we are limited by existing data sources, we are ill-equipped to identify and respond to the gendered dimensions of poverty.

In its conceptualisation and development, the IDM was not bound by existing data, although in designing the survey we were conscious that it must be practically feasible and easy to administer. We were also conscious of the need for a survey that can be used at various levels, from local to national or global, or with specific population groups. While the IDM does not resolve the problems of limited data, it does aim to expand thinking about the kinds of data that are collected, including through nationally representative censuses and surveys, and used in poverty measurement. The Philippines pilot of the IDM survey demonstrated that it is easy to administer and relatively low-cost. A second pilot of the IDM is planned for Fiji in late 2014, with the aim of further testing and refining the measure.

## **Measuring Poverty as if Gender Matters**

Sylvia Chant (2010: 2) reminds us that 'gender is not just about women and poverty is not just about income'. The IDM provides a way of taking gender seriously as an analytic category in the measurement of poverty, and revealing the depth and nature of poverty among women and men. By focusing on the individual, it is sensitive not only to gender, but also to other individual characteristics that may intensify poverty. It moves beyond income, and towards the dimensions of poverty that those with lived experience of poverty consider important.

The Philippines trial has shown that while some refinement is needed, the Individual Poverty Measure is a feasible measure, which is capable of revealing differences not only within households, but also within communities and across geographic location. It is capable of revealing the complex inter-relationship between gender, generation, geography, social location and poverty. It has enormous potential to create more effective and responsive policies and services, and to track progress (or lack of progress) with a high degree of sensitivity.

### **Further information**

The four year international research collaboration on which the Individual Deprivation Measures is based was mainly funded by an Australian Research Council Linkage Grant. The final report of the research, including a detailed discussion of the IDM (lead author Scott Wisor), will be launched in late 2014 available at [www.genderpovertymeasure.org](http://www.genderpovertymeasure.org) (the website also holds information about all the contributors).

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## Notes

- 1 For a more detailed discussion of the dimensions of the Individual Deprivation Measure, see 'Lifting the lid on the household: Introducing the *Individual Deprivation Measure*, a briefing paper developed by Jo Crawford and Sarah Smith of the International Women's Development Agency, drawing in particular on the work of Scott Wisor and Kieran Donaghue, available at [www.genderpovertymeasure.org](http://www.genderpovertymeasure.org)
- 2 My thanks to Janet Hunt for her insights and discussion on this point.

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