Poverty in All its Forms:
Determining the dimensions of poverty and how to measure them

Rationale

In seeking to end poverty in all its forms, the 2015 Sustainable Development Goals explicitly recognise the multidimensional nature of poverty and require progress to be measured, nationally and globally, with respect to multidimensional measures of poverty. Latest measures, for example the Multidimensional Poverty Index, represent a progress compared to one dimensional measures. Yet, they have generally been developed without direct reference to people experiencing poverty and have questionable face and construct validity. Furthermore, there is little evidence upon which to assess the relative importance of the various dimensions or to establish relationships between them. Research is proposed to address these deficiencies and omissions so as to inform the development of robust measures.

Key objectives

The project seeks to facilitate and advance global thinking about the nature and measurement of the dimensions of poverty through engaging the international policy community with the experiences, views and reasoning of people facing poverty in diverse cultural and development settings.

By prioritising the knowledge of people in poverty but directly merging this with scientific understanding and the perspectives of practitioners and the general public, the research will be uniquely able to foster a common view as to:

1. The dimensions of poverty: their salience and relative importance in different contexts; and the extent to which they are complementary (additive) or substitutable (with trade-offs between certain dimensions)
2. The implications of these findings for existing understandings of poverty and its constituent dimensions, the development of appropriate policy responses, and the specification of comparable national poverty measures and indicators.

Moreover, the project will foster a better capacity to work and think across social and educational boundaries for all participants, provide certified training for people with direct experience of poverty, and evaluate the specific process of collaboration in order to replicate it in other contexts.

Original participatory approach

Research will be conducted in five countries, one in each continent: Tanzania; Bangladesh; Bolivia; Canada; and the United Kingdom, and employ a deeply participative research technique, Merging of Knowledge, developed over the last twenty years by ATD Fourth World.

Merging of Knowledge (MoK) with people with a direct experience of poverty is a process where they are recognised as co-researchers, on an equal footing with other participants. In a MoK process, knowledge is identified, brought forth and refined in a careful and deliberative democratic process within small working groups. Yet it is recognised that time and support is required for those with least voice to build the levels of self-confidence and mutual trust required for open and honest communication. Merging of Knowledge can be distinguished from other approaches to participatory research by its commitment to autonomy of each group of peers, building knowledge and reciprocity between peer groups engaging in data collection and knowledge production.

The research will be undertaken by national teams comprising people in poverty - the majority - together with practitioners (providing services or advocating of people in poverty), academics and members of the public. These national teams have co-developed the research strategy. Each is coordinated and supported by local ATD Fourth World and research staff under the guidance of an international steering team and a scientific advisory board.

Unprecedented scope
Within the bounds set by resources and capacity, the project seeks to draw upon as broad a range of experience of poverty as is possible. Covering countries in the global North and South, it seeks to reach people living in poverty including those in extreme poverty and/or who are excluded through disability, illness, homelessness, statelessness; to acknowledge that poverty may differ across the life course and by gender and place, notably across the urban/rural divide; and that it may be shaped by relations with others. The views of men and women in poverty when in the life-stage of work and raising a family will be sought in all countries with the experiences of other groups being selectively captured in different countries.

The research is both modular and staged. The core modules comprise work with:
- Men/women of working age across all study countries and in rural and urban sites
- Children and adolescents (in two countries, rural and/or urban)
- Older people, elders (in two countries, rural and/or urban)

Each module will entail identification and work with different peer groups including people in poverty, practitioners in contact with people in poverty, members of the public (possibly including selected journalists), academics and decision makers. Within each module, stages of outreach, recruitment and preparatory engagement will be followed by key knowledge building stages during which peer groups will be repeatedly convened. The groups will sequentially identify the dimensions of poverty, incorporate alternative perspectives, rate and rank dimensions and formulate the logics for doing so, explore the conjunction of dimensions and the possibility of substitution between them and consider practical ways of measuring each dimension. Knowledge generated from the peer groups will be 'merged' through analysis, discussion and reflection within national research teams with emergent conclusions being submitted to critical review by the initial peer groups or their representatives. It is envisaged that upwards of 80 peer groups will be convened on multiple occasions and that as many as 3,000 persons will participate in various components of the research.

Additional satellite projects
Knowledge of the proposed research has already generated requests by outside researchers to pursue parallel investigations. It is proposed to systematise such activity by soliciting complementary self-funded research to be undertaken with the proactive support of the international team and scientific panel and the full exchange of methodology and learning. This will further expand the social and geographic coverage of the project.

Unique international learning
The international dimension of the research is critical to establishing the global relevance of the study findings and offers a further tier in the Merging of Knowledge framework engaging civil society, the policy community and academe in contact with people in poverty. It is envisaged that the scientific panel will be instrumental in this process through engaging in a reciprocal process of knowledge building with each member being in direct touch with one of the national teams, responding directly to emerging findings and sharing their insights with professional colleagues as the project progresses. Three international meetings are planned: the first bringing the national teams together with the scientific panel and selected members of the policy community to reflect on the module appertaining to working aged families; a second at the midpoint meeting with senior scientists and decision-makers outside the advisory board; and, finally, a largely open meeting at the end of the research designed to seek a common understanding of the dimensionality of poverty.

In the design and implementation of the research, equivalence is to be prioritised over standardisation, while consistency will be achieved through an initial seminar bringing together the international steering committee with the coordinators of national team, the making and exchange of progress videos by national teams and regular online and in-situ exchange between the international and national teams.

Effective programme management

The work of the national research teams will be coordinated by Dr Xavier Godinot (ATD Fourth World) and Professor Robert Walker (Oxford University) under the guidance of the scientific advisory panel comprised of international experts (see annex). Methodological counsellors will be available to advise the national teams and the research process will be independently evaluated.

Annex

Academic Advisory Panel

Sabina Alkire, Director of the Oxford Poverty and Human Development Initiative, University of Oxford

Grace Bantebya-Kyomuhendo, Professor in the School of Women and Gender Studies at the University of Makerere, Kampala

Francois Bourguignon, Professor at Paris School of Economics, former Chief Economist at the World Bank

Martine Durant, Chief Statistician, Director of the OECD Statistics Department

Geal Giraud, Chief Economist, French Department of Development

Paul Healey, Head of Profession for Social Development, Department for International Development (DfID),

Ides Nicaise, Professor at the University of Leuven, Belgium, coordinator of the European project RE-InVEST.

Francesca Perucci, Assistant Director, United Nations Statistics Division, Lead Author of the United Nations Millennium Development Goals Report 2011

Magdalena Sepulveda, former UN Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights, Senior Research Fellow at the UN Research Institute for Social Development (UNRISD)

Christopher Winship, Diker-Tishman Professor of Sociology, Harvard University, USA.

Nobuo Yoshida, Senior Economist, Poverty and Equity Global Practice, World Bank Group