

The Debate on Globalization, Poverty and Inequality: Why Measurement Matters

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Abstract: In the last year or so, markedly different claims have been heard within the development community about how just much progress is being made against poverty and inequality in the current period of “globalization.” This paper provides a non-technical overview of the conceptual and methodological issues underlying these conflicting claims. The paper argues that the dramatically differing positions taken in this debate often stem from differences in the concepts and definitions used and differences in data sources and measurement assumptions. These differences are often hidden from view in the debate, but they need to be considered carefully if one is to properly interpret the evidence. The paper argues that the best available evidence suggests that, if the rate of progress against absolute poverty in the developing world in the 1990s is maintained, then the Millennium Development Goal of halving the 1990 aggregate poverty rate by 2015 will be achieved on time in the aggregate, though not in all regions. The paper concludes with some observations on the implications for policy-oriented debates on globalization and pro-poor growth.

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Introduction

What has been happening to the living standards of poor people in the world lies at the heart of the globalization debate. Indeed, as Amartya Sen has recently argued, the real concern of the so-called “anti-globalization” protestors is surely not globalization *per se*, for these protests are amongst the most globalized events in the modern world; rather, their concerns seem to stem in large part from the continuing deprivations and rising disparities in levels of living that they see in the current period of globalization (Sen, 2002).

Are their concerns justified? There is no denying the perceptions held by the critics of globalization that poverty and inequality are rising. For example, the web site of the International Forum on Globalization confidently claims that “globalization policies have contributed to increased poverty, increased inequality between and within nations”.¹ Whether this is a valid generalization, or even a valid characterization for any specific group of countries, is another matter.

Both sides in the debate have sought support from “hard” data on what is happening to poverty and inequality in the world. A “numbers debate” has developed, underlying the more high-profile protests and debates on globalization. By some accounts, the proportion of people living in extreme poverty in the developing world has fallen sharply in the 1990s (Bhalla, 2002; Sala-I-Martin, 2002). Other assessments suggest much more modest gains, including those regularly published by the World Bank (the latest published update is Chen and Ravallion, 2001). Yet others claim that globalization has led to greater poverty (International Forum on Globalization, 2001).

There have been similar disagreements about what has been happening to inequality. By some accounts, income inequality has been rising in the world (see for example, International

Forum on Globalization, 2001, and Galbraith, 2002, commenting on Dollar and Kraay, 2002a), while by others (including Bhalla, 2002, and Sala-I-Martin, 2002) it has been falling, though not continuously.

Who should we believe? To answer that question, we need to probe more deeply into the sources of the differences between the conflicting assessments. This calls for closer scrutiny of the concepts being used, which are not always in agreement between the two sides of the debate. It also requires closer inspection of the data sources and methods of analysis, even when there is agreement on the concept one is trying to measure. Only then can one form a judgment as to what the available data can really tell us about progress against poverty and inequality in the new era of globalization. This essay offers a non-technical commentary on the conceptual and methodological differences underlying the “numbers debate” on globalization.

Ambiguous concepts make deceptive statistics

Before trying to quantify anything, one must first be clear about the concept to be measured. Specialists are (typically) precise about these things, but that is not so true in the popular debate on globalization.

Most observers have a reasonably clear idea about the difference between “poverty” and “inequality.” As these terms are normally defined, poverty is about absolute levels of living – how many people cannot attain certain pre-determined consumption needs. Inequality is about the disparities in levels of living – for example, how much more is held by rich people than poor people. Measures of poverty and inequality are typically based on household consumption expenditure or income normalized for differences in household size and the cost-of-living. Aggregate measures of poverty at country or global levels tend to get the most attention, though finer breakdowns (such as by geographic area or ethnic group) are often brought into the picture.

Some commentators are less careful about an equally important distinction lingering under the surface of the globalization debate — between the ideas of “relative poverty” and “absolute poverty.” The latter typically means that the poverty line has fixed purchasing power. Relative poverty typically means that the poverty line has higher purchasing power in richer countries or areas within countries. How much higher is a matter of debate; this depends on how important relative deprivation is to a person’s assessment of his or her well-being, and that is not something we know much about. Economists have traditionally assumed that people only care about their own consumption, but there is now a body of evidence suggesting that people do hold “social preferences,” and that relative deprivation is an important determinant of welfare and behavior.² There is wide agreement that a person’s own income is far too narrow a basis for judging economic well-being. To the extent that this depends on relative income, measures of poverty in terms of welfare will need to use poverty lines that vary with the mean income of some relevant reference group. Putting that into practice in a convincing way is another matter.

The measurement choice does matter. Roughly speaking, the more “relative” your poverty measure, the less impact economic growth will have on its value. Those who say globalization is good for the world’s poor tend to be undisguised “absolutists.” By contrast, many critics of globalization appear to think of poverty in more relative terms. At one extreme, if the poverty line is proportional to mean income then it behaves a lot like a measure of inequality. Fixing the poverty line relative to mean income has actually been popular in poverty measurement in Western Europe. This method can show rising poverty even when the levels of living of the poor have in fact risen. That is surely an extreme position that would seem hard to defend. While we can agree that relative deprivation matters, it appears to be very unlikely that

individual welfare depends only on one's relative position, and not at all on absolute levels of living, as determined by incomes.

A further distinction is between the ideas of “relative inequality” and “absolute inequality.” In applied work, economists typically mean “relative inequality” when they talk about the effects of greater trade openness on inequality. Relative inequality depends on the ratios of individual incomes to the overall mean. (The precise nature of that dependence — the weight given to income disparities at different levels, for example — has been the subject of a large literature.³) So if all incomes grow at the same rate then relative inequality is unchanged. A common finding in the academic literature is that greater trade openness has roughly the same effect on the growth rate of income at different levels of income.⁴ Then openness can be said to be “distribution-neutral” in that (relative) inequality is unchanged on average.

But that is not the only defensible concept of inequality. “Absolute inequality” depends on the absolute differences in levels of living, rather than relative differences, as captured by the ratios to the mean. Consider an economy with just two household incomes: \$1,000 and \$10,000. If both incomes double in size then relative inequality will remain the same; the richer household is still 10 times richer. But the absolute difference in their incomes has doubled, from \$9,000 to \$18,000. Relative inequality is unchanged but absolute inequality has risen sharply.

Perceptions on the ground that “inequality is rising” appear often to be referring to this concept of inequality. Indeed, in experiments used to identify which concept of inequality is held by people, it was found that 40% of participants thought about inequality in absolute terms.⁵ It is not that one concept is “right” and one “wrong.” They simply reflect different value judgments about what constitutes higher “inequality.”

These value judgments carry considerable weight for the position one takes in the globalization debate. Finding that the share of income going to the poor does not change on average with growth does not mean that “growth raises the incomes (of the poor) by about as much as it raises the incomes of everybody else” as claimed by an article in the *Economist* magazine (May 27, 2000, p.94), referring to Dollar and Kraay (2000a). Given existing inequality, the income gains to the rich from distribution-neutral growth will of course be greater than the gains to the poor. In the above example of two households, the income gain from economic growth is 10 times greater for the high-income person; to say that this means the poor share fully in the gains from growth is clearly a stretch. And the example is not far fetched. For example, for the richest decile in India, the income gain from aggregate growth will be about four times higher than the gain to the poorest quintile; it will be 15-20 times higher in Brazil or South Africa.

The common empirical finding that in the literature that changes in (relative) inequality have virtually zero correlation with rates of economic growth naturally carries little weight for those who are concerned instead about absolute inequality. The latter does tend to rise with growth, and fall with contraction. Across 117 spells between successive household surveys for 47 developing countries (the same data set used in Ravallion, 2001) I find a strong positive correlation — a correlation coefficient of 0.64 — between annualized changes in the absolute Gini index (in which absolute differences in incomes are not scaled by the mean) and annualized rates of growth in mean household income or consumption, as estimated from the same surveys. Yet there is virtually zero correlation (a coefficient of -0.06) with relative inequality, as measured by the ordinary Gini index in which absolute differences are scaled by the mean.

A further source of confusion underlying the conflicting claims that have been made about what has happened to “inequality” in the world in the current period of globalization stems from lack of clarity about whether one is talking about inequality between countries or between people (wherever they live). Some of the claims about rising “inequality” have been based on the fact that, looking back over the last 40 years or so, initially poorer countries have tended to experience lower subsequent growth rates (see, for example, Pritchett, 1997). But of course countries vary enormously in population size. If one takes account of this, then the picture of rising inequality changes dramatically. Total inequality between people in the world can be thought of as having two components: the amount of inequality between countries and the amount within countries. Since one naturally weights by population when calculating overall inequality, the between-country component is also population weighted. Given the population weighting, the between-country component has tended to fall, even though poorer countries have not tended to have higher growth rates (see, for example, Schultz, 1998, and Bhalla, 2002). The two largest countries naturally figure prominently in this finding. China and (more recently) India have enjoyed high growth rates and this has been a major contributing factor to lowering overall inequality in the world.

Nor can it be denied that there is evidence of rising inequality within many countries, including China and India. Rising inequality is not, however, correlated with growth rates; indeed, amongst growing economies, inequality tends to fall about as often as it rises (Ravallion and Chen, 1997; Ravallion, 2001).

Combining the between and within country pictures, there is no convincing sign of a significant trend increase in overall inequality between people over the last 20 years or so; nor is there convincing evidence of a trend decline in inequality.

The devil is in the details

Conceptual ambiguities are not the only reason for the conflicting claims that one finds in the globalization debate. There are also differences in how the available data have been interpreted and differences in the underlying assumptions made in measurement.

Let us now focus on absolute poverty. All the estimates I have seen suggest a trend decline in the incidence of poverty and the total number of poor over the bulk of the 1980s and 1990s.⁶ Progress was not even over time. There is evidence of an increase in the number of poor in the late 1980s and early 1990s (Chen and Ravallion, 2000).⁷ However, this sub-period is not typical, and it is not too surprising that progress against poverty was stalled then, given simultaneous macroeconomic difficulties in the two largest countries, China and India, on top of the weak growth in Africa. If one focuses instead on the period since about 1990, all sources I know of suggest a sustained decrease in the number of poor by any absolute standard. This is also evident if one looks at estimates going back to 1980 and before (Bourguignon and Morrisson, 2002; Sala-I-Martin, 2002; World Bank, 2002).⁸

While there appears to be broad agreement that absolute poverty is tending to fall, there are some large discrepancies amongst the available estimates of the rate of progress being made against absolute poverty. I will focus on two recent estimates. In the first, Bhalla (2002) presents estimates of the incidence of absolute poverty in the developing world that imply that the United Nations' Millennium Development Goal (MDG) of halving the 1990 "\$/day" poverty rate by 2015 was in fact already reached in 2000.

Contrast this with the World Bank estimates for the 1990s which suggest that the MDG for poverty will be reached on time if the rate of progress since 1990 is maintained (World Bank, 2000). This is based on the numbers reported in World Bank (2000), comparing 1990 and 1998.

This implies a drop in the \$1/day poverty incidence of about 0.6 percentage points per year, which would be sufficient to halve the 1990s poverty rate by 2015.⁹ On updating this estimate using the latest available data, we find a mean annual rate of decline over the in the 1990s of 0.7 points per year, which (if maintained) would mean that the MDG for poverty would be achieved slightly ahead of time.¹⁰

These two sources differ in other respects. For example, Bhalla's estimates indicate that the incidence of poverty in South Asia is well below average for the developing world as a whole, while the Bank finds above average poverty for that region. However, here I will focus on the difference in the aggregate numbers — similar reasons underlie the differences in regional composition.

How could two estimates of roughly the same thing be so different? Have we really achieved the MDG for poverty, 15 years ahead of time, as Bhalla claims? To answer this question we need to look inside the black box of poverty measurement.

To measure poverty one first needs a poverty line. Different people naturally have different ideas of what “poverty” means. This is true between countries as well as within a given country. Richer countries tend to have higher poverty lines when converted to a common currency at exchange rates that attempt to assure purchasing power parity (PPP). Amongst poor countries, there is very little income gradient in the poverty lines — absolute consumption needs tend to dominate in a poor country. But as incomes rise, societies naturally tend to alter their views as to what minimum standard of living is deemed acceptable. So poverty lines rise with mean consumption.

Recognizing this feature of how poverty lines vary, how should we measure poverty in the world as a whole? There are two approaches that have been taken. The relative poverty

approach uses poverty lines that increase with mean income of the country. For example, Chen and Ravallion (2001) present results for a relative poverty line which rises with mean income above a critical level, as determined by the aforementioned empirical relationship between actual poverty lines and mean consumption across countries. This is arguably a better approach than setting a poverty line that is proportional to mean income, which tends to give either absurdly low poverty lines in poor countries, or absurdly high ones in rich countries.

However, all such relative poverty lines do not treat people with the same level of consumption the same way, and so the resulting measures would clearly lose meaning as measures of absolute income poverty. Since 1990, the World Bank has chosen instead to measure global poverty by the standards of what poverty means in poor countries, which gave the “\$1/day” line (Ravallion, et al., 1991; World Bank, 1990, 2000). This poverty line is then converted to local currency using the latest PPP exchange rates for consumption and local consumer price indices are then used to convert the international poverty line in local currency to the prices prevailing at the time of the survey.

It is fully acknowledged that this is a conservative definition; while one could hardly argue that the people in the world who are poor by the standards typical of the poorest countries are not in fact poor, there are many more poor people in the world who are poor by the standards of middle-income countries. Some observers have argued that the World Bank has systematically underestimated the extent of poverty using its \$1/day line and argue that a higher line should be used;¹¹ still others have argued for a lower line. However, there is no escaping the fact that there is a degree of arbitrariness about any poverty line. Provided one is consistent across countries, one can test whether the regional comparisons and assessments of progress over time are robust to such differences.

Having set a poverty line, one counts how many people live below it. Over the last 20 years there has been considerable expansion in the coverage and frequency of the household surveys that allow one to calculate the proportion of the population living in households with consumption expenditures and/or incomes per person below the poverty line. Such surveys are currently the most widely used source of data for measuring poverty in the world.

It is important to recognize that these surveys come with numerous problems. In the international comparisons of the “\$/day” poverty rates done by the World Bank, only surveys that meet certain quality criteria — arguably quite minimal criteria — are included. The surveys must be nationally representative, include a sufficiently comprehensive consumption or income aggregate (including consumption or income from own production) and it must be possible to construct a correctly weighted distribution of consumption or income per person.

The Bank’s researchers found that the latter requirement was often not met by pre-existing data sources, so they have insisted on being able to get back to the original “raw” household-level data sets rather than rely on summarized tabulations from secondary sources to assure that the calculations are done consistently. By building up the global poverty numbers from the primary data — either the raw micro data or special-purpose tabulations designed to meet uniform quality criteria — past errors or inconsistencies in estimating distributional statistics can be dealt with. The latest published up-date used over 300 surveys since the mid-1980s for measuring global poverty, representing 90 countries (Chen and Ravallion, 2001). At the time of writing, the data base included 400 surveys representing 100 countries.

Nonetheless, there are still numerous comparability problems across these various surveys. For example, some use income while some use consumption to measure well-being. There are also comparability problems amongst surveys in the questionnaires used — such as

differences in recall periods for consumption — that can matter greatly to the results obtained. Some observers in the globalization debate have chosen to largely ignore these differences. Yet others find casual anecdotal observations more persuasive. For example, Secor (2003) quotes an academic contributor to the globalization debate as rejecting existing quantitative data showing lower inequality in Indonesia than Australia; the support given by the academic for his claim that the existing data are wrong is that “You can check that out by going to the capital city and driving in from the airport. You can see it ain’t so.” Thankfully, most observers would not find a drive into the capital city from the airport more persuasive than a well-designed nationally-representative sample survey of households (as is done in both Australia and Indonesia).

But even if the surveys are entirely accurate, it must be acknowledged that the measure of poverty obtained can still miss important aspects of individual welfare. Using household consumption ignores inequalities within households. Nor does it reflect peoples’ concerns about uninsured risk to their incomes and health as well as their feelings about relative deprivation, as already discussed. A conventional poverty measure can hardly be considered a sufficient statistic for judging the quality of people’s lives.

Even putting these concerns to one side, there are numerous differences in the methods used to measure the incidence of poverty in the world.¹² How one deals with the diversity in the underlying survey data is an important factor. Some researchers have indiscriminately mixed distributions that vary in important ways. For example, some are distributions of household income (not per capita) and the poorest x% in some surveys refers to households while others follow the methods used by the Bank’s researchers in which they refer to people. These differences can matter greatly to the measures one obtains of poverty and inequality. The fact that household (rather than per capita) distributions were more common in the 1960s and ‘70s

than 1980s's and '90s also biases comparisons over time, given that household distributions tend to show higher inequality (given that, when measuring inequality between individuals, inequality within households is invariably ignored for lack of data). Signs of falling inequality may simply reflect this fact, rather than a real change in distribution.

However, these differences may well be less important than others. While many researchers prefer to use the consumption expenditures or incomes reported in surveys, some have preferred to anchor their poverty measures to the consumption or GDP means obtained from a country's national accounts. This is the method used by Bhalla (2002), Sala-I-Martin (2002) and UNCTAD (2002). This method ignores the absolute levels of consumption or income found in all these surveys. By exploiting the mathematical properties of poverty measures, the published quintile shares from surveys are combined with the published national accounts aggregates to come up with estimates of the incidence of poverty. This method tends to show a higher rate of poverty reduction over the last 20 years than the survey-based method.

The researchers who measure poverty using the national accounts admit that they are doing so partly as a matter of convenience; it is just a whole lot easier to do it this way than by going back to all those messy micro household-level data sets. But they also argue that it is better to obtain mean household consumption or income from the national accounts rather than the surveys that were designed for that purpose. To support this, they argue that surveys tend to underestimate mean household consumption and income (especially income).¹³ They point to the discrepancies between survey aggregates and national accounts aggregates. To some extent these discrepancies reflect differences in the coverage and definitions of the two data sources. The differences also stem from measurement errors in both sources.

However, for the purpose of estimating the extent of poverty it is actually immaterial which gives the better estimate of average household consumption or income. The key question is which data source gives the better estimate of the poverty measure — that is after all the object of the exercise. Even if one agreed that the national accounts are right, there is no reason for assuming that the errors in the surveys leave inequality unaffected. For various reasons (including fear of taxation or legal action), the rich tend to underreport their incomes, and this is thought to be a much more serious problem (in both its absolute level and proportionately) than for the poor. It has not been established, and is quite unlikely from what we know, that the discrepancy between these two data sources is entirely due to underestimation of consumption or income levels in the surveys but that they still get inequality right. More plausibly, underestimation of mean income from a survey tends to come hand-in-hand with an underestimation of the extent of inequality.

To see why anchoring poverty measures to the national accounts can go so wrong, consider the following simple example. The true but unobserved distribution of income is (say) 1,2,3 (person 1 has an income of 1, person 2 has income 2, person 3 has 3). The poverty line is slightly above 1, so the true poverty rate is 1/3. We do a survey, and the three people respond that their incomes are 1, 1.5 and 2. Income of person 2 is underestimated by one quarter, while it is underestimated by one-third for person 3. The survey gives the right poverty rate. However, the survey underestimates the true mean; the survey mean is 1.5. Now let's assume (for the sake of argument) that the national accounts do give the right mean of 2. If we assume that the survey under-estimation is distribution-neutral then we multiply all three incomes by 4/3. The "corrected" incomes are 1.3, 2 and 2.7 — implying that there is no poverty. We get the mean right, but the poverty measure is way off the mark.

This is just an example. However, it may not be far fetched. One study found that the mean income of the 10 highest income households in each of 18 surveys for countries in Latin America was generally no more than the average salary of the manager of a medium to large sized firm (Szekely and Hilgert, 2000). Clearly there is massive under-reporting by the rich.

Careful data work has also been revealing about the sources of the discrepancies between surveys and national accounts, and has thrown considerable doubt on methods of measuring poverty that assume that the national accounts get the mean right while the surveys get inequality right. For India it has been found that for categories of consumption accounting for over 75% of the consumption of the poor, the divergence between the national accounts and the national household surveys is small (Sundaram and Tendulkar, 2001). Simply multiplying all incomes or consumptions by a single number so that the survey gives the same mean as the national accounts results in a serious overstatement of the consumption expenditure of the poor and hence produces a spurious reduction in the headcount index.

Recent research has studied how poverty and inequality measures from survey data can best be corrected for the tendency of richer households to not want to participate in such surveys. Results for the U.S. suggest that without such corrections, surveys tend to appreciably underestimate both the mean and the extent of income inequality, but that these two effects are roughly offsetting for measures of poverty (Mistiaen and Ravallion, 2002). Very little correction is needed for the incomes of the poorest few deciles, but the correction factors are as high as 30-50% for the richest decile. Again this makes clear just how wrong one can be in assuming that the income under-estimation in surveys is distribution-neutral.

The key point is that simply correcting the survey mean need not get you a better measure of poverty, even if you believe that the national accounts give you the correct mean for

measuring poverty, which is far from obvious. If you don't believe the overall survey mean, how can you believe the distribution of income obtained from the same survey?

Dubious claims about the welfare impacts of globalization

People on both sides of this debate have been quick to draw conclusions about the impacts of “globalization” from their favorite poverty numbers. The title of a recent book by the International Forum of Globalization asks: “Does globalization help the poor?” and the book answers with a confident “no.” The back cover of Bhalla (2002) asks: “Who has gained from globalization?” and answers with equal confidence: the poor. Yet readers of neither book will come away any wiser about the answer to these questions than when they started. In fact neither book contains the sort of analysis that would be needed to credibly allow attribution of the claimed changes in poverty and inequality to “globalization.” We are not given any evidence that would allow one to identify the role played by greater openness to external trade (as one aspect of globalization) in the distributional changes observed, versus other factors such as rising agricultural productivity, demographic factors, changes in the distribution and returns to education and internal policy reforms.

More careful analytic work has attempted to identify the causal effects of (for example) greater trade openness on aggregate inequality, with controls for at least some of the other factors that are likely to matter. A number of attempts to throw empirical light on the welfare effects of trade liberalization have been made using aggregate cross-country data sets, whereby levels of measured inequality or changes over time in measured inequality and/or poverty are combined with data on trade openness and other control variables.¹⁴ An example can be found in the careful econometric analysis using cross-country panel data set found in Dollar and Kraay

(2002a), who find no sign that greater openness to external trade is either good or bad for (relative) inequality, and hence that the poor tend to benefit (absolutely).

However, there are also reasons to be cautious in drawing implications from these studies. There are concerns about data and methods and it is unclear how much power cross-country data sets have for detecting any underlying effects of greater openness or other covariates. The attribution of inequality impacts to trade policy reforms *per se* is particularly problematic.

One way in which the correlations (including lack of correlation) found in these studies can be deceptive is that starting conditions vary a lot between reforming countries. Simply averaging across this diversity in initial conditions can readily hide systematic effects of relevance to policy. For example, countries differ in their initial level of economic development. It is often argued that greater openness to external trade will have very different effects on inequality depending on the level of economic development — increasing inequality in rich countries and decreasing it in poor ones.¹⁵ However, the opposite outcome is possible when economic reforms, including greater openness to external trade, increase demand for relatively skilled labor, which tends to be more inequitably distributed in poor countries than rich ones. There is some evidence of a negative interaction effect between openness to trade and initial GDP per capita in regressions for inequality across countries (Barro, 2000; Ravallion, 2001).

These problems can be dealt with using more sophisticated methods to analyze the compilations of country aggregates, such as by allowing for nonlinearities through interaction effects between trade openness and initial conditions. However, the problems go deeper. Aggregate inequality or poverty may not change with trade reform even though there are both gainers and losers at all levels of living. In cases in which the survey data have tracked the same

families over time, it is quite common to find considerable churning under the surface.¹⁶ Some people have escaped poverty while others have fallen into poverty, even though the overall poverty rate has moved rather little. Numerous sources of such diverse impacts can be found in developing country settings. For example, geographic disparities in access to human and physical infrastructure between and within developing countries can impede prospects for participating in the growth generated by reform, and these disparities tend to be correlated with incomes.¹⁷

Consider the case of China, which has recently undertaken a major trade reform, namely its accession to the WTO in 2001. One cannot possibly understand how this reform will affect the population simply by looking at its impact on (say) the aggregate poverty rate or overall inequality. The economic geography of poverty and how this interacts with the geographic diversity in the welfare impacts of policy reforms is crucial to understanding its impact. In the aggregate, the results of Chen and Ravallion (2002) indicate a small positive impact on mean household income, with slightly lower poverty in the short term as a result of the reform.¹⁸ However, there is still a sizable, and at least partly explicable, variance in impacts across household characteristics. Rural families tend to lose; urban households tend to gain. There are larger impacts in some parts of the country than others; for example, one finds non-negligible welfare losses amongst agricultural households in the North-East — a region in which rural households are more dependent on feed grain production (for which falling relative prices are expected from WTO accession) than elsewhere in China.

Past analyses in the literature that simply averaged over these differences would miss a great deal of what matters to the debate on policy. Reforms may well entail sizable redistribution between the poor and the rich, but in opposite directions in different countries or

different regions within countries. One should not be surprised to find that there is no correlation between growth and changes in inequality, or that there is no overall impact of policy reform on inequality. Yet there are real welfare impacts under the surface of this average impact calculation. Claims made about the distributional impacts of trade reform using cross-country comparisons are of questionable relevance for policy in any specific country.

Lessons for how to achieve pro-poor growth

What is “pro-poor growth”? By one definition it is a situation in which incomes of the poor grow at a higher rate than the non-poor.¹⁹ The problem with this definition is that distributional changes can be “pro-poor” with no absolute gain to the poor, or even falling living standards for poor people. Equally well, “pro-rich” distributional shifts may have come with large absolute gains to the poor. Instead, Ravallion and Chen (2003) define pro-poor growth as growth that reduces poverty by some agreed measure.

Amongst those who know the survey-based evidence, I don’t think you will find much disagreement with the claim that economic growth is typically (though by no means invariably) pro-poor, in the specific sense that absolute poverty (measured against a poverty line with fixed real value) tends to fall with growth. Many observers have gone from this observation to conclude that policies that are known to be good for growth are good for poverty reduction.²⁰ This does not follow. Growth-promoting policies often have distributional implications that cannot be ignored if one is interested in the impacts on poverty.

The case of India is instructive. Poverty incidence in India has been falling at a trend rate of about one percentage point per year since about 1970, and the country appears now to have returned to this trend decline since the macroeconomic difficulties of the early 1990s (Datt and Ravallion, 2002). However, performance has been uneven between states. Some states have been

doing far better than others, both in the longer term, and in the wake of economic reforms over the last 10 years.

But the growth rate needed to achieve this trend decline has been rising over time. The responsiveness of national poverty incidence to both non-agricultural output per capita and agricultural yields have been declining over time, especially so for non-agricultural output (Datt and Ravallion, 2002; Ravallion and Datt, 2002).

Here the geographic composition of India's growth has played an important role: widening regional disparities and limited growth in lagging areas has made the overall growth process less pro-poor over time. By and large, economic growth in India has not occurred in the states where it would have the most impact on poverty nationally. These differences in the impact of growth on poverty relate in turn to differences in access to infrastructure and social services (health care and education) that make it harder for poor people to take up the opportunities afforded by aggregate economic growth (Ravallion and Datt, 2002).

Such heterogeneity in the impact of growth on poverty holds important clues as to what else needs to be done by governments to promote poverty reduction, on top of promoting economic growth. According to some observers "such actions are not needed...Growth is sufficient. Period." (Bhalla, 2002, p.206). The basis of this claim is the evidence that poverty reduction has generally come with economic growth.

But that misses the point. Those who are saying that growth is not enough are not typically saying that growth does not reduce absolute income poverty, which (as an empirical generalization) is hard to deny. They are saying that combining growth-promoting economic reforms with the right policies to help assure that the poor can participate fully in the opportunities unleashed by growth will achieve more rapid poverty reduction than would be

possible otherwise. Redressing the antecedent inequalities of opportunity within developing countries as they open up to external trade is crucial to realizing the poverty-reducing potential of globalization. That is the real challenge facing policy makers striving for pro-poor growth.

Notes

¹ <http://www.ifg.org/store.htm>

² See, for example, the discussion in Fehr and Fischbacher (2002) and references therein. On the implications for poverty measurement see Ravallion (1998).

³ For a recent survey see Cowell (2000).

⁴ See, for example, Dollar and Kraay (2002a,b).

⁵ The source is Amiel and Cowell (1999). Participants in these experiments were students in the UK and Israel.

⁶ Bhalla (2002), Bourguignon and Morisson (2002), Chen and Ravallion (2000, 2001), Sala-I-Martin (2002), World Bank (2000, 2002).

⁷ This is apparently why Fischer (2003, p.8) claims that “For some time it was the accepted view is that the proportion of people living in poverty in the world has been declining but their absolute number has been increasing” (a view which he then takes issue with); Fischer refers to the “World Bank” as the source.

⁸ World Bank (2002) claims that 200 million people escaped absolute poverty in the world as a whole over 1980-2000. This estimate has been questioned by Wade (2002) and others on the grounds that it is obtained by combining different sources (namely the estimates of Bourguignon and Morrison, 2002) up to 1992 and those of Chen and Ravallion (2000) after that. Shaohua Chen and I have subsequently re-estimated our series back to the early 1980s to check the claim made in World Bank (2002). Data coverage and quality deteriorate as one goes back further in time. While recognizing this limitation, our estimates suggest that if anything the 200 million figure is probably an underestimate.

⁹ Reddy and Pogge (2002) and Wade (2002) (though apparently drawing solely on Reddy and Pogge) argue that the World Bank’s estimates (as reported in World Bank, 2002, and Chen and Ravallion, 2002) underestimate the level of poverty and overstate its rate of decline in poverty, though they do not present alternative estimates to support this claim. Elsewhere I have addressed in detail the methodological concerns raised by Reddy and Pogge (Ravallion, 2002a).

¹⁰ This calculation was made by Shaohua Chen using the same methods documented in Chen and Ravallion (2000, 2001) but updating the data set used there to include surveys not available at that time. The estimates for India in the 1990s used an adjustment method proposed by Deaton (2001) to deal with a serious comparability problem between the 1999/2000 survey design and previous surveys.

¹¹ Examples include Wade (2002) and Reddy and Pogge (2002).

¹² For a detailed discussion of the differences between the methods used by Bhalla (2002), for example, and the World Bank see Ravallion (2002b).

¹³ For evidence on this point for developing and transition economies see Ravallion (2003).

¹⁴ Examples include Bourguignon and Morisson (1990), Edwards (1997), Li et al., (1998), Lundberg and Squire (1999), Barro (2000), Dollar and Kray (2002).

¹⁵ Wood (1994) makes a qualified argument along these lines.

¹⁶ Baulch and Hoddinott (2000) compile evidence for a number of countries.

¹⁷ In the context of China’s lagging poor areas, see Jalan and Ravallion (2002).

¹⁸ The study used a general equilibrium model to estimate the effects of the trade reform on prices and wages and a large household survey to estimate the household level welfare impacts; for further details see Chen and Ravallion (2002).

¹⁹ See for example, Kakwani and Pernia (2002), who define pro-poor growth as a situation in which the actual change in poverty over time is greater than the change that would be expected if inequality (strictly the Lorenz curve) did not change.

²⁰ For example Fischer (2003, p.3) argues that “...the surest route to sustained poverty reduction is economic growth. Growth requires good economic policies.” Fischer then goes on to discuss policies that are thought to be good for growth.

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