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PERSPECTIVE PAPER

*Benefits and Costs of the Poverty Targets
for the Post-2015 Development Agenda*

Valerie Kozel

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Post-2015 Consensus

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Introduction

As 2015, the target date for the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) approaches, the debate on the post-2015 development framework and related Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) is gathering momentum. A large number of goals have been proposed—at last count, the Open Working Group (OWG) proposed 169 specific targets under 17 development headings in their Final Outcome document, the Higher Level Panel (UNHLP, 2013) proposed 54 (primarily overlapping) targets, and a wide range of additional targets and related indicators have been proposed by others involved in the process. The recommendations of the OWG have been sent to the UN General Assembly, and the UN Secretary-General released an advance version of the SDG Synthesis Report in early December, 2014. Important constituency groups continue to coalesce around specific goals; for example, an open letter, signed by a group of eminent international economists, was sent to the UN Secretary General (Nov 14, 2014) that aimed to “champion the cause of economic growth as the foundation stone for achieving long-term poverty reduction”¹. The Copenhagen Consensus Center’s initiative to sponsor “hard-nosed” assessments of the economic costs and benefits of proposed goals and targets, along with the strengths and weaknesses of data and methodologies to monitor progress, is providing welcome contributions to ongoing discussions.

This Perspective Paper focuses on proposed targets under the poverty goal and builds on the comprehensive Copenhagen Consensus Assessment prepared by Gibson (2014). In doing so it raises three questions. First, do the poverty targets proposed by the Open Working Group and Higher Level Panel strike the right balance between breadth, idealism, and realism? Are they too broad, difficult to achieve (as some have claimed) or do they set too low a bar to provide an effective organizing framework for a consensus on post-2015 development priorities (according to others). Second, in determining priorities linked to economic, social, and environmental (Rio +20) considerations, is it appropriate—as indicated in Gibson’s assessment—to focus solely on the extreme poverty (\$1.25 a day) target? And third, are the data and methodologies for measuring and monitoring progress towards poverty targets sufficiently robust and well-specified to carry the SDG debate forward? What can be done to balance the tensions between the desirable aspects of a global poverty monitoring system (comparability across countries in terms of data and methodologies) and desirable aspects country-level poverty monitoring systems (local ownership, consistency over time)?

Poverty goals and targets

“Eradicating extreme poverty and hunger” was the first goal under the MDGs, and a similar albeit broader formulation--“end poverty in all its forms everywhere”--is proposed as the first goal for the post-2015 SDGs. Five specific targets are listed in the final document of the Open Working Group:

¹ <http://www.theigc.org/news-item/open-letter-to-the-united-nations/>

- By 2030, eradicate extreme poverty for all people everywhere, currently measured as people living on less than \$1.25 a day.
- By 2030, reduce at least by half the proportion of men, women, and children of all ages living in poverty in all its dimensions according to national definitions.
- Implement nationally appropriate social protection systems and measures for all, including floors, and by 2030 achieve substantial coverage of the poor and vulnerable.
- By 2030, ensure that all men and women, particularly the poor and vulnerable, have equal rights to economic resources, as well as basic services, ownership, and control over land and other forms of property, inheritance, and natural resources, appropriate new technology, and financial services including microfinance.
- By 2030, build the resilience of the poor and those in vulnerable situations, and reduce their exposure and vulnerability to climate-related extreme events and economic, social, and environmental events and disasters.

Stretch goals play an important role

A lot has been learned about what it takes to reduce poverty, based on lessons from performers e.g. in East Asia, as well as many weaker performers. Historically high and sustained rates of economic growth buttressed by investments in human resources and infrastructure has led to phenomenal progress in countries like China in the 1990s, and more recently Indonesia and Vietnam. In contrast, countries that experienced sluggish growth or sharp economic downturns, struggled with fragility, conflict, and weak or rapacious leadership coupled with high levels of corruption have made considerably less progress. Many countries in sub-Saharan Africa have seen progress only in the past decade, and poverty remains stubbornly high and in some cases rising in “fragile” states like the DRC, Nigeria, and Cote d’Ivoire. But no region is exempt: Myanmar stands in stark contrast to neighboring countries in East Asia. New empirical work (Kozel and Kim 2015) suggests that as many as 37.5 percent of the 51 million persons living in Myanmar were still poor in 2010, with substantially higher levels of poverty in states and regions affected by ethnic violence and conflict e.g. Rakhine state.

The proposed post-2015 SDGs are a broader and more ambitious set of development goals than the previous MDGs. The call to eradicate poverty “in all its forms everywhere” is very ambitious. There has been widespread debate and analysis about the feasibility of eradicating extreme poverty by 2030, facilitated by new research and empirical studies. None but the most idealistic believe that this goal—or the other SDG zero-goals—are possible to achieve. The Assessment report summarizes recent empirical evidence (e.g. work by the Brookings Institute, Center for Global Development, and the World Bank), and then identifies some of the underlying features of rapid poverty reduction in the past that are not likely to carry forward into the future. It notes East Asia has been a leader in global poverty reduction due to a unique set of features (e.g. one-off institutional reforms, the substantial role of rice in consumption basket of the poor) that are not replicated in other regions of the world. The Assessment draws on a growing body of research that suggests extreme poverty is becoming less sensitive to economic growth—one of the main drivers of

mass poverty reduction in the past—and this is leading to a rise in many countries. Among other factors, rising inequality in many countries is linked to slow growth at the bottom of the income distribution, and a growing gap between the haves and have-nots. The nature of poverty is changing—and many countries are grappling with questions of how to reach their remaining poor, who increasingly live in more isolated hard-to-reach geographic areas, are elderly or chronically ill, and may have unique social identities linked e.g. to ethnicity, caste, or religion. Some groups are increasingly left behind in the development process. The increasing concentration of poverty among ethnic minority groups in Vietnam (noted in the Analysis, also Kozel 2014) is consistent with trends in many other countries and regions (Hall and Patrinos 2012). Even wealthy countries like the U.S. report substantially higher rates of poverty among certain ethnic groups: in 2013, 27.2 percent of African Americans and 23.4 percent of Hispanics living in the U.S. were below the poverty line, compared to only 9.6 percent of people who self-identify as non-Hispanic whites.

There is one important addition to the factors described in the Analysis paper that may slow the pace of future poverty reduction. Specifically, policies and programs to reduce poverty are likely to engender stronger political support when they are not narrowly targeted and instead address the needs of a wider share of the population. This is akin to Akun's "leaky bucket" and mechanisms are discussed e.g. in Gelbach and Pritchett (2000). The substantial reductions in extreme poverty achieved by many countries means that the remaining poor are an increasingly small share of their populations, and the interests of the extreme poor may be very distinct from the concerns of the median voter. Initiatives to narrowly target scarce resources may not have widespread political support and low and middle income countries. The situation becomes further complicated if extreme poverty is increasingly concentrated in groups that have been socially excluded or suffer different forms of discrimination e.g. indigenous peoples, religious or ethnic minorities.

Millennium Development Ideals

The SDG "zero-targets" that were ratified in the preliminary UN Synthesis Report (viz. "no person left behind") have been faulted by many as being too ambitious. But others have argued (Pritchett and Kenny 2013) that the proposed SDGs are not ambitious enough, and call for the process and consultations leading up to the post-2015 SDGs to "set the stage for a global re-engagement on the question of 'what is development'" as well as the respective role(s) of the key actors—international agencies and organizations, governments, research institutes and advocates—in ensuring future progress. This work faults the proposed SDGs for exclusively focusing a very low poverty line (\$1.25 a day) that has no relevance for middle and upper income countries. It raises important questions: is it "fair and equitable" to apply "global" standards to low income countries that do not apply equally to all countries in the world? And are these different standards consistent with the recommendations of the preliminary UN Synthesis Report, which simultaneously argues for the need to "commit to a universal approach, with solutions that address all countries and all groups" coupled with an agreement that "no goal or target be considered met unless met for all social and economic groups" (UN Secretary General 2014, pg. 19). Pritchett and Kenny (2013) argue for a post-2015 framework that reflects Millennium Development

Ideals, the addition of a set of (higher order) goals that better capture the rising aspirations that all countries have for the well-being of their citizens. These higher order goals would reflect standards (and targets) that apply equally in all countries and thus have wider political appeal—by creating constituencies in wealthier countries, but also arguably in middle and lower income countries where the \$1.25 a day poor are an ever diminishing share of the population. It is not at all surprising that national poverty lines are almost always higher than the \$1.25 a day extreme poverty line. This is true by construction—the \$1.25 a day poverty line was calculated as the average of the national poverty lines for the poorest 15 countries (primarily in sub-Saharan Africa) in mid-2000s (Ravallion et. al. 2009) as well as by design.

We take the view that “stretch” goals have an essential role in post-2015 SDG discussions. Eradicating extreme poverty (the so-called zero-target) is one such stretch goal. Reducing global poverty, as defined using a truly global standard that reflects standards that apply in all countries, is another—and complementary--stretch-goal. What would comprise a truly global standard remains for discussion, but this would be by order of magnitude higher than the existing \$1.25 a day line. By way of example: in 2005, the averaged national poverty line for the 15 poorest European countries was \$13.4 a day, more than ten times the cut-off used to monitor progress for the MDGs and now proposed for the SDGs. Defining goals that are too narrow—albeit more realistic—runs the risk of losing support and important constituencies in upper income countries (and global discussions, which tend to be dominated by international agencies and upper income/donor interests) as well as in middle and lower income countries. Pritchett (2006) notes that nearly one-billion people are prosperous by global standards (live above national poverty lines set by rich countries), another one-billion live in “extreme” poverty (below \$1.25 a day), which leaves a resounding five billion persons “who are poor by standards of rich countries but not poor by the standards of the very poorest countries” (Pritchett and Kenny 2013, pg. 3). The legitimate aspirations of the remaining five billion should be reflected in Millennium Development “Ideals”.

Is extreme (\$1.25 a day) poverty the only poverty goal that matters?

The short answer is “of course not”. This being said, the \$1.25 a day extreme poverty goal is important: it was included in the original MDGs, a data base and methodology (viz. POVCAL) was developed to monitor progress, and a substantial body of research has grown up around past and future progress. There are no doubt weaknesses in the global poverty monitoring system (described in Gibson’s Assessment, also see below) but these are accompanied by important strengths—an enormous amount of effort has gone into strengthening and expanding the World Bank’s POVCAL data base, and moreover making the data and results widely available. But I would also argue for maintaining a focus on the second poverty goal—i.e. substantially reducing the number of people who are poor by national standards, first because they reflect countries’ own standards (see below) and second because help to raise the bar in SDG discussions. And monitoring progress

according to national standards is no more (or less) difficult than monitoring progress according to \$1.25 a day standards.

Gibson's Assessment makes a heroic (and creative) effort to measure the costs and benefits of achieving the \$1.25 a day poverty goal. However it is difficult to break down the costs of the many interlocking policies and investments that lead e.g. to faster and more inclusive growth or higher investments in human resources (ref. the Copenhagen Consensus Center's "Education" analysis and perspective papers), and some of the things that arguably matter the most for poverty reduction are also the most difficult to quantify—e.g. strengthening economic and social institutions, reducing corruption. In addition, if we take into account recent evidence on the falling elasticity of the poverty headcount with respect to growth coupled with the changing face of extreme poverty in large parts of the developing world, achieving progress towards zero-targets will become progressively more expensive as the group of remaining (extreme) poor becomes smaller and more unlike populations that have risen out of poverty. Achieving the lofty ideals laid out in Secretary General's Synthesis report—"no person left behind"—will invariably come at a high cost.

Gibson's Assessment is surprisingly unenthusiastic about the contribution of targeted programs and transfers to future poverty reduction, including the contributions of social protection programs more broadly. Agreed we should be concerned about risks of the unintended adverse consequences of transfers that are described in the paper. But there is a vast and growing body of theoretical and empirical work on the positive impacts of both targeted and untargeted transfers, including their role in risk mitigation as well as more conventional redistribution, and evidence from this work deserves more careful consideration in the work-up to the post-2015 SDGs. Similarly, there is a growing number of impact evaluations—including evaluations of CCTs and other social protection programs—that have been completed in recent years. While results have been mixed, many of these evaluations highlight a range of short-run benefits from targeted programs, as well as emerging longer-run benefits. There is no doubt that broad-based growth and national development strategies will continue to be a driving force for global poverty reduction; but there is a growing consensus income transfers will play an increasingly important complementary role.

Poverty data and monitoring systems

Although we have learned a lot about what it takes to reduce poverty, we still struggle—and endlessly debate—how best to measure poverty and monitor progress. There has been a rapid increase in poverty data since the World Bank's POVCAL global poverty monitoring system was set up in 1989—POVCAL currently includes data from more than 850 household surveys from 127 developing countries. However important gaps remain—for specific regions and countries (particularly in north and sub-Saharan Africa) and for recent years. Data are particularly sparse for the poorest countries, fragile and conflict-affected states. Data issues are discussed in detail under the Copenhagen Consensus Center's "Data for Development" assessment and perspective papers. However "Data for Development" goals focus primarily on improving the *quantity* of poverty data—measured

in terms of the number and temporal frequency of household surveys—and less on the *quality and consistency* of poverty data across and within countries.

The “Poverty” assessment paper does a nice job of describing current problems with poverty data and measurement methodologies, and notes—correctly—that measurement problems are likely to worsen over time as countries become more affluent and the composition of household consumption changes. The share of consumption linked to basic food items—which fairly well-measured in household expenditures surveys—is falling while the share of welfare linked to consumption of durable goods (e.g. motorcycles, cell phones) and housing services is rising. Some claim that changes in the composition of consumption are primarily limited to more affluent households and thus will have only a limited impact on poverty measures. But recent empirical work does not bear this out. For example, in 1998, only 2 percent of poor households in Vietnam (37.4 percent of the population) owned a motorbike, 30 percent owned a TV, and no one owned a cell phone. But by 2010, 51 percent of the remaining poor (20.7 percent of the population) owned a motorcycle, 74 percent owned TVs, and a hefty 37 percent reported owning a cell phone. Although ownership rates were higher for wealthy households, they were nonetheless significant for the poor. (Kozel 2014) By 2010, consumption of housing services accounted for 15 percent of total consumption in Vietnam, with substantially higher shares in the top welfare quintile (26 percent) than the bottom quintile (7 percent). Similar patterns are found in a number of other low income countries in East Asia e.g. Laos and Cambodia. Unfortunately, only a small number of lower and middle-income countries have household surveys that accurately capture “rising” components of consumption i.e. housing services, durables, also meals eaten outside the households. Moreover data and measurement practices differ widely across countries: statistical offices in some countries (e.g. Vietnam, Mongolia, and Nepal) base national poverty estimates on a very comprehensive measure of household consumption, while others (e.g. India, Indonesia, and Thailand) construct much more limited consumption measures.

Differences in data and measurement methods are not a concern for national debates and policy discussions. National definitions of poverty are based on a country’s own surveys and measurement methodologies. But problems arise in the context of global poverty monitoring. The majority of survey data in POVCAL comes directly from national statistical offices, and thus may be subject to substantial differences in underlying concepts and definitions. Some efforts have been made to “harmonize” the consumption and/or income aggregates in POVCAL, for example in the context of the SEDLAC initiative for countries in Latin America, and a more recent initiative that focuses on survey data from countries in Central Asia and Europe. But the underlying survey data and definitions for the countries that account for most of the world’s poor—e.g. China, India, Indonesia, Nigeria, Ethiopia, Bangladesh—are not fully consistent.

Harmonization has strengths and weaknesses

Is it realistic to expect—or even to aim for—harmonization i.e. consistency of definitions and methods across all countries? Gibson’s Assessment labels existing national surveys and measurement practices as “idiosyncratic” and calls for a greater harmonization of

survey and measurement practice across countries, consistent with global best practices. The benefits vis-à-vis the global poverty monitoring system are clear; harmonization would substantially improve the accuracy and comparability of global poverty outcome measures. However, while acknowledging the technical merits of these recommendations, there are several related concerns that merit a more in-depth discussion.

First, existing national surveys and related poverty monitoring systems are not so much idiosyncratic as they are embedded in the history and policy apparatus of individual countries. They are designed to reflect the needs of national governments and policy makers, and in most countries only coincidentally respond to the interests of international community². Thus the clients for poverty data and monitoring at the country level are different from clients for global poverty monitoring systems. Both have legitimate interests but different priorities. Despite the rhetoric about country-led systems, global poverty monitoring systems primarily reflect the needs of the broader international community viz. the UN family, World Bank also ADB; bilateral agencies like USAID and DFID; international NGOs, think tanks and research institutes such as Brookings, the International Growth Center, Center for Global Development, ODI and others. International “voices” have been prominent in SDG discussions. In contrast, country-level voices and views—including local think-tanks and researchers as well politicians and members of government—appear much more muted. This is despite representation in the Open Working Group as well as 88 country-level stakeholder consultations, workshops and related events carried out in more than 50 countries in 2012/13 in the work-up to the SDGs.

Harmonization is not straightforward, nor is it necessarily without pitfalls. Some countries have a robust system of regular household surveys while others (particularly countries in sub-Saharan Africa) do not—there are fundamental gaps in the quality and timeliness of poverty data, and it is important to fill these gaps. However less attention has been paid to the factors linked to differences in definitions and measurement approaches across countries. Consider the example of East Asia: most countries in the region have been carrying out surveys to collect data on poverty and living conditions for many years, and using these data to support the design and implementation of national poverty reduction and programs. For example, Thailand carried out its first nationally representative household expenditure survey in 1957. This early survey was subsequently revised and expanded in the late 1960s, renamed the Thailand Socio-Economic Survey (SES), and carried out every five years. The periodicity of the Thai SES was increased to every two years in 1987 with the explicit objective of monitoring poverty and supporting key debates around national policy issues. Similarly, Indonesia has carried out national household surveys and published regular statistics on welfare and poverty since 1984, initially every 2-3 years and more recently (since the early 2000s) on an annual basis. The Philippines has carried out 10 rounds of its Family Income and Expenditure Survey (FIES) every three years beginning 1985. FIES poverty statistics are widely debated and assist in the design of

² The situation may be different in sub-Saharan Africa, where substantial external resources are still spent on statistical capacity building and most household surveys are financed by foreign donors. Governments finance their own income/expenditure surveys in most Asian countries, with the exception of some low income countries e.g. Nepal, Laos, Timor Leste.

national planning efforts. Vietnam was a relative late-comer: two Vietnam Living Standards (VLS) surveys were conducted in 1990s (in 1993 and 1998) with extensive international support. The Vietnam Central Statistics Office then put in place a series of bi-annual national poverty surveys beginning in 2002 and carrying through to the present. Lao PDR has carried out five household welfare surveys, every five years beginning in 1992, and Cambodia has carried out seven surveys, beginning in 1994 but with the majority of surveys in the 2000s. With the exception of Myanmar, all lower and middle income countries in East Asia (with the exception of smaller countries in the Pacific Islands) currently have in place a regular system of household welfare surveys, typically financed through the governments' own resources and fully embedded in country systems. Only the poorest countries e.g. Cambodia, Laos, and Timor Leste still depend on external resources to finance household poverty surveys.

Improvements that could be made to the design of all these surveys as well as to measurement methodologies and national monitoring systems. International partners are continuing to provide TA and financial support for statistical strengthening in countries throughout the world. But changes come at a cost. Countries that already have in place regular (albeit sometimes infrequent) household welfare surveys and a system for measuring and monitoring poverty will be reluctant to change what they do: national governments are much more interested in making consistent comparisons over time (which argues for greater stability in data and methods) than in modifying their monitoring systems in order to make "robust" comparisons with other countries.

But change is sometimes inevitable

Although maintaining stability and consistency over time is good for both national and global poverty monitoring, it is also important to update poverty monitoring systems on a regular basis, particularly as countries become more affluent and economies are more globally integrated. Vietnam carried out an extensive update of its poverty monitoring system in 2010: it updated the design of its long-running Living Standards Survey (the VHLSS) to better capture welfare from better housing services, also the substantial expansion in the ownership of new types of durable goods (cell phones, computers) and changing food consumption patterns, including meals eaten outside the household. A revised and more comprehensive consumption aggregate was constructed, as well as a new set of poverty lines that better reflected the current consumption patterns of low income households. Until the revisions in 2010, Vietnam was using a poverty line based on the consumption patterns of low-income households in 1993. Taken together, these changes resulted in an upward revision of the poverty rate from around 6 percent of the population (based on old definitions and methodology) to 21.7 percent of the population.

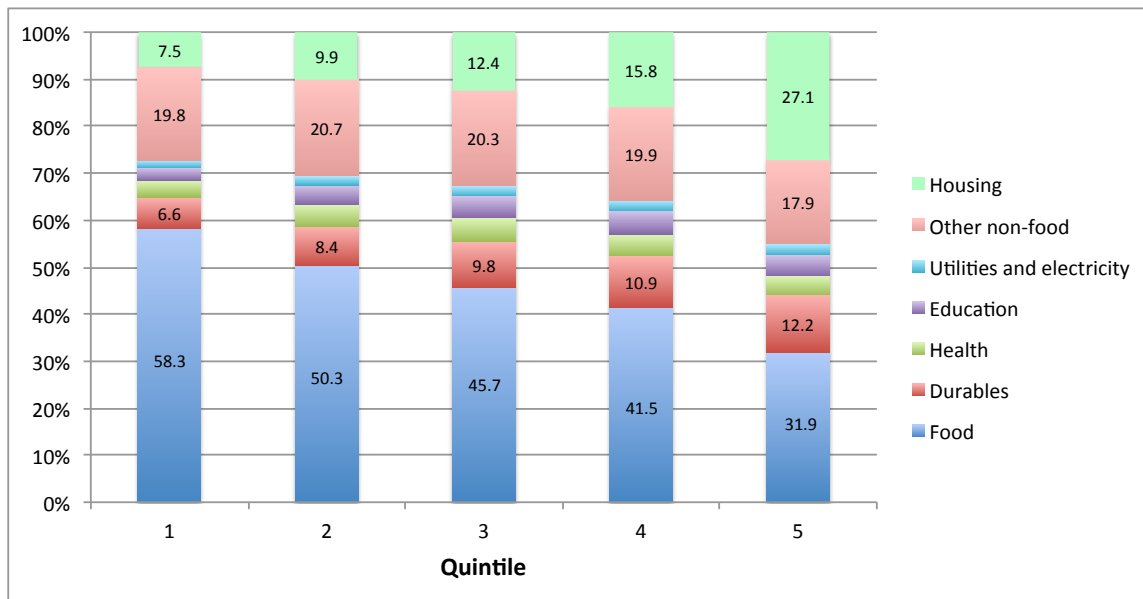
Doing it right—constructing comprehensive measures of household welfare, adjusting for regional cost of living differences, updating poverty lines—is essential for robust poverty monitoring, both at the national level as well as for global poverty monitoring. But it is even more essential for monitoring levels and trends in inequality; using data from the 2010 VHLSS, we carried out some simple simulations to measure the impact of using different definitions of household welfare on the Gini coefficient, a commonly used

measure of inequality. Results suggest that this widely used measure of inequality is extremely sensitive to the definition of welfare. For example the Gini coefficient for a parsimonious “basic needs” definition of welfare (primarily food, and excluding imputed rents and the flow of services from durables) is only .318 in comparison to a Gini of .392 based on a comprehensive definition of welfare (imputed rents and durables included) (Table 1). Housing is particularly important in Vietnam: the share housing in consumption (imputed rents) rises sharply with income. Housing contributes only 7.5 percent of welfare in the poorest quintile compared to 27.1 percent for the households in the wealthiest quintile (Figure 1). In parallel, the food share falls from 58.3 (poorest quintile) to 31.9 (wealthiest quintile). If we *exclude* housing services from the consumption aggregate, the Gini coefficient decreases from .392 to .344.

Table 1: Gini coefficients for different definitions of welfare (consumption per-capita), 2010 VHLSS

Definition of Consumption	Gini Coefficient
Comprehensive consumption aggregate, imputed rents and durables included	.392
Parsimonious aggregate, imputed rents and durables excluded	.318
Only rents excluded	.344
Only durables excluded	.379

Figure 1: Composition of Per-capita expenditures by per-capita expenditure Quintile, 2010 VHLSS



Source: Kozel, 2014

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