Defining the characteristics of poverty and their implications for poverty analysis

Blessing Gweshengwe and Noor Hasharina Hassan

Abstract: Literature on the characteristics or underlying qualities of the concept of poverty is extensive but fragmented and rarely discusses the influence of these characteristics on poverty analysis. This paper examines the characteristics of poverty and their implications for poverty analysis. It primarily made use of secondary data together with some primary data. Findings are that poverty characteristically has a language and is multidimensional, complex, individual- or context-specific and absolute or relative. The characteristics of poverty have significant implications for, and should therefore be taken into consideration in, poverty analysis. The language of poverty reveals the dimensions and severity of poverty faced by a given community. It also enables poverty analysts to uphold the dignity of people and minimise misconceptions about poverty in a society. Lastly, the language of poverty provides an understanding of the context-sensitive meaning of poverty. The multidimensional and complex nature of poverty guides in the selection of an appropriate poverty worldview for analysing poverty. Moreover, the individual- and context-specific characteristic of poverty reflects the variation in the nature and severity of poverty according to age, gender and context. Knowledge about the absolute or relative nature of poverty, furthermore, is essential for poverty classification. The findings of this paper could allow for a more holistic or effective analysis of poverty, which may contribute to policy building.

Keywords: Poverty; language; multidimensional; complex; context; absolute; relative; poverty analysis

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PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT
World governments and their development partners are working towards achieving the Sustainable Development Goal 1, which calls for the elimination of all forms of poverty in the world. Success in achieving this goal depends on, among other factors, the effective analysis of poverty, which is only possible if one has a clear understanding of the influence of the characteristics of poverty on poverty analysis. However, literature on the characteristics of poverty is fragmented and rarely sheds light on the relationship between the characteristics and analysis of poverty. This article, therefore, pieces together literature on the characteristics of poverty and examines their implications for poverty analysis. Thus, the article provides invaluable insights into the characteristics of poverty and their influence on poverty analysis.
1. Introduction
Poverty “is one of the defining challenges of the 21st Century facing the world” (Gweshengwe et al., 2020, p. 1). In 2019, about 1.3 billion people in 101 countries were living in poverty (United Nations Development Programme and Oxford Poverty and Human Development Initiative, 2019). For this reason, the 2030 Global Agenda for Sustainable Development Goals has called for the elimination of all forms of poverty everywhere in the world (Koehler, 2017). Success in making a dent in global poverty depends on, among other factors, the effective analysis of poverty, which is only possible if one has an unambiguous understanding of the influence of the characteristics of poverty on poverty analysis. In this paper, the characteristics of poverty are taken to mean the underlying qualities of poverty as a concept. Scholarly work on such characteristics of poverty is extensive but fragmented and rarely sheds light on the relationship between the characteristics and analysis of poverty. This paper, therefore, examines the characteristics of poverty and their implication for poverty analysis.

This paper is significant in that it pieces together fragmented literature on the characteristics of poverty. In so doing, it provides a more holistic picture of the characteristics of poverty. In addition, the paper offers an analysis of the influence that these characteristics have on poverty analysis. The paper therefore enhances poverty analysis, which should ultimately improve the efficacy of poverty eradication efforts.

2. Methods
The paper mainly made use of secondary data together with some primary data. Secondary data were collected from two main sources: textbooks and journal articles that focus on the characteristics and analysis of poverty. In the selection of these sources, the following themes were used as criteria: poverty language, multidimensionality and complexity of poverty, poverty as individual and context-specific, absolute poverty and relative poverty. Poverty characteristics were derived from these themes. Analysis, therefore, focused on what the themes mean and how they influence poverty analysis. Primary data were extracted from a Poverty Class at Great Zimbabwe University. The data collected were on poverty terminologies used by the Shona-speaking community in Zimbabwe.

3. Findings
Poverty characteristically has a language and is multidimensional, complex, individual or context-specific, absolute and relative (Ali-Akpajak & Pyke, 2003; Bantebya-Kyomuhendo, 2015; Chambers, 2012; Dhongde & Minoiu, 2010; Gandolfi & Neck, 2010; Ohio-Ethimiaghe, 2012; Philip & Rayhan, 2004; World Bank, 2001). The nature of these traits of poverty and how they influence poverty analysis are examined hereafter.

3.1. Poverty has a language
In the words of Philip and Rayhan (2004, p. 2), poverty is “blessed with rich vocabulary, in all cultures.” That is, poverty is a phenomenon with a plethora of local terminologies in any given society. This was confirmed by Gweshengwe et al. (2020) in their study of the language and meaning of poverty in Brunei Darussalam. They found multiple and different terms that Malay-speaking people in Brunei use when referring to poverty or poor people (Table 1). In Indonesia, Malay-speaking communities also use varied terminologies to refer to poverty, which include tidak mampu (unable), tidak punya apa-apa (have nothing), tidak cukup (not enough), kurang (lack), hidup susah (difficult life) and wena sa ambai (material lack) (Rumbewas, 2006). Shona communities in Zimbabwe also use varied terms to describe poverty or poor people (Table 2). In Uganda, meanwhile, enaku, obunako, obwavu and obworo are some of the local poverty terms used by Ugandans that are associated with material deprivation, lack of social capital, orphan-hood, men’s failure to marry and start a family due to poverty, and poverty-induced psychological defects (Bantebya-Kyomuhendo, 2015).
In analysing poverty in any given community, therefore, poverty analysts should start by ascertaining local poverty terminologies (Chambers, 2002; World Bank, 1999). This is essential for five reasons:

(a) Poverty terminologies reflect the forms or dimensions of poverty facing a community (Ayoola et al., n.d.; Brock, 1999; Jutte, 1994; Ohio-Ethimiaghe, 2012). The poverty terminologies presented in Tables 1 and 2 above, for example, reveal different forms of poverty, which are financial, material, economic and social in nature.

(b) It helps to minimise confusion or misconception in understanding poverty in a society. Within a particular community, different poverty terms can be used for the same subject (Chambers, 2002; World Bank, 1999), or a term can be used to refer to different forms of poverty. By way of example, the Shona-speaking people of Zimbabwe use kuchoboka, kusauka, kuomerwa and kukamambwa in referring to financial poverty; and kukwangaya and urombo when referring to both financial poverty and the lack of basic necessities. Such case may cause confusion and misconception in analysing poverty, especially for poverty analysts who are foreign to the Shona community’s way of life.

(c) Local poverty terminologies also reveal the severity of the poverty that a person or household experiences. For instance, in Brunei, the term miskin is used to refer to non-severe poverty and fakir to severe poverty. In Zimbabwe, Shona terms: kudyanhoko dzezvironda, kutambura, kushupika, kunhonga masvosve/sunzi nemukanwa and pfumvu are associated with extreme poverty (see also Table 2). Meanwhile, Yoruba-speaking people in Nigeria use ise and osi when referring to non-extreme poverty and extreme poverty, respectively (Ohio-Ethimiaghe, 2012).
(d) It helps poverty analysts to uphold people’s dignity. According to Gweshengwe et al. (2020), communities have poverty terms or expressions that they prefer to use when referring to poverty or poor people as some terms can erode people’s self-confidence, esteem or respect. The same authors (Gweshengwe et al., 2020) also note, the Malay poverty terms: miskin and fakir, are somewhat sensitive within the Bruneian community. In referring to poverty or poor people, Bruneians prefer to use the following terms, tidak or kurang mampu/kurang kemampuan (living in need/cannot afford basic needs), kesusahan dalam kehidupan (hardships/difficulties or difficult life) or orang or keluarga susah (people with difficulties or hardships) (Gweshengwe et al., 2020). In Zimbabwe, Shona poverty terms such as nhamo, rombe and kudya nhoko dzezvironda are somewhat frowned upon by people as the terms can make one feel inferior. Researchers therefore need to know local poverty terms or expressions so as to uphold people’s dignity and not to offend them when analysing poverty.

(e) Language of poverty provides an understanding of the context-sensitive meaning of poverty. In Brunei, for example, the terms miskin and fakir denote local definitions of poverty. Miskin refers to “having an income that covers more than half but not all (≥ 50%) of a household’s basic needs and having a few household assets”, while fakir refers to extreme poverty: “having an income that meets at most half (≤ 50% > 100%) of a household’s basic needs or not having an income at all, and lacking household assets” (Gweshengwe et al., n.d.). These definitions are being used by government welfare agencies. Such definitions are context-sensitive but are somewhat different from the international poverty definition of 1 USD.90 a day. However, they can be used in reference to the international poverty definition.

### Table 2. Poverty terminologies used by Shona communities in Zimbabwe

| Shona                                      | English Translation                          |
|--------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------|
| Kutambura/Kunetseka/Kushupika/kushushikana/ | Struggling/hard life/suffering/difficult life/can’t afford basic needs (extreme poverty) |
| Kudya nhoko dzezvironda/Kutambudzika/kunonga masivose/masunzi nemuromo/pfumvu | Extreme poverty                               |
| Kukwangwaya                                | Lack of income (being broke) shortage of food |
| Rombe                                      | Being unemployed and materially deprived     |
| Nhama                                      | Poverty/hard life                            |
| Kushupika                                  | Hard life                                    |
| Kushaya/kushayiya                          | Lack of basic needs                          |
| Urombo                                     | Financial problems/lack of basic needs        |
| Kuchoboka/kukamambwa/kuomerwa/kusauka      | Lack of income/money/being broke             |
| Kushoreka                                  | Social poverty—isolation/marginalization      |
| Kuremerwa                                  | Economic/social poverty                      |
| Nzara/Zhara/Dzeta                          | Hunger/missing out on meals                  |
| Tsuro/shuro yemubhuku                      | Material lack/deprivation                    |
| Jambwa                                     | Less fortunate                                |
| Mujombo                                    | A school dropout, and cattle herder          |

Source: Authors.

#### 3.2. Multidimensionality and complexity of poverty

Poverty has multiple dimensions—financial, economic, social, political, health, environmental and seasonal—which interlink with and reinforce each other (Ali-Akpajiak & Pyke, 2003; Bourguignon & Chakravarty, 2003; Chambers, 1981, 1983, 1995, 2012; Devereux et al., 2012; Hick, 2016). The nature of these dimensions and how they interlink with and reinforce each other are briefly described below.
Financial dimension of poverty: refers to a lack or low level of income or having an income below a country's minimum wage or income-poverty line; lack of access to loans from legal financial institutions, lack of savings, and being in debt (Banerjee, 2016; Chambers, 2012; Laderchi, 2000; Rowntree, 1902; Wong, 2012; World Bank, 2001).

Economic dimension of poverty: refers to a lack of resources needed to lead an acceptable life, have a decent standard of living or meet basic needs (G. F. R. Ellis, 1984; SIDA, 2017). These resources include natural or environmental capital such as land, clean air and water, forestry products, and fishery stock; physical capital like infrastructure (roads, buildings, markets and communication systems) and production goods such as machinery and tools; and human capital like being educated, skilled and healthy (Brand, 2002; F. Ellis, 2000; SIDA, 2017). Economic deprivation also refers to a lack of employment or having a low-paid, irregular and insecure job (Hulme & McKay, 2007). It could also refer to a lack of access to business or entrepreneurial opportunities.

Material dimension of poverty: this dimension of poverty is directly linked to the living conditions of households or individuals (Terraneo, 2017). It denotes material deprivation—a lack of or having low-quality consumer goods (household assets) and services such as furniture, radios, televisions, means of transport, clothing, dietary, housing, utilities, and amenities or facilities (Chambers, 2006, 2012; Gordon, 2010; Kus et al., 2016; Townsend, 1979, 1987).

Social dimension of poverty: refers to a lack of social capital (G. F. R. Ellis, 1984). By definition, social capital refers to norms for social control and networks (relationships) for support and securing benefits (Bartkus & Davis, 2009; Brand, 2002; Ostrom, 2009; Portes, 1998). It could also refer to the social resources that households depend on for their livelihoods objectives (De Satge et al., 2002). Social capital is built on and strengthened by reciprocating favours or assistance, and that involves investing material, cultural and other resources (Ostrom, 2009; Portes, 1998). Poor people usually struggle to reciprocate as they lack the required resources to do so. The social dimension of poverty also includes limited or no participation in social activities or functions, and an inability to take up responsibilities that are societally encouraged or approved of (Gordon, 2010; Raphael, 2011; Townsend, 1979, 1987).

Environmental dimension of poverty: focuses on places where poor people live, including the inside and outside home environments (Chambers, 1994, 2007). This includes areas that are: (i) remote or isolated; (ii) lacking infrastructure and communication systems; (iii) vulnerable to disasters such as floods, droughts, and landslides; (iv) lacking clean water and electricity; and (v) susceptible to crime and drug abuse; etc. (Chambers, 1994; Narayan et al., 2000; The Chronic Poverty Report, n.d.).

Seasonal dimension of poverty: according to Chambers (2012), poverty has a seasonal dimension (seasonality), which manifests in all other poverty dimensions and in how they interlink. It includes the realities1 that people, especially the poor, experience repeatedly at certain times of the year, which are brought about or aggravated by the changing of seasons, climatic changes in particular (Chambers, 1979, 1981, 1995, 2012; Devereux et al., 2012). During the wet season in the tropics, for example, poor people experience a combination of realities: lack of food and money; high food prices; indebtedness; debilitating sicknesses such as diarrhoea, malaria and dengue fever; snakebites; isolation when floods cut them off for weeks or months; collapsing and leaking shelter (Chambers, 1979, 1981, 1995, 2012; Devereux et al., 2012; Narayan et al., 2000). For example, the wet season in the Gambia is associated with food shortages, high incidence of infections, lower weight body weights of mothers, lower birth weights and high levels of child morbidity and mortality (Chambers, 1979). In Nepal, meanwhile, the wet season brings about a peak in a combination of realities: hunger, hardships, and diseases such as cholera, diarrhoea or dysentery, hookworm infections and enteric fever (Ono et al., 2001; Shively et al., 2011). Seasonality also emanates from non-climatic seasons such as back-to-school (determined by school calendar), festival, and human conception seasons (Chambers, 2012; Hadley, 2012; Lokshin & Radyakin, 2012). Thus, seasonality is both climatic and non-climatic in nature.
Health dimension of poverty—refers to ill health (the fact of being in poor health) and lack of access to health care (Chen & Pan, 2019; Clarkea & Erreygersa, 2019; Combat Poverty Agency, 2004; Institute for Research on Poverty, n.d.). It includes other health realities such as malnutrition, lower life expectancy, vulnerability to diseases, being sick, high level of stress, exclusion from health-care services.

Figure 1 presents the interconnectedness and interdependency of the dimensions of poverty explained above. The health poverty dimension is not included, however.

As Figure 1 shows, the relationship between the poverty dimensions is not linear but cyclical in nature. For instance, a lack of income could cause, sustain or strengthen material deprivation, loss of social capital, lack of economic resources and seasonal realities, which could, in turn, fuel the financial deprivation and other dimensions. The interconnectedness and reinforcing nature of the poverty dimensions make poverty complex. Although the health poverty dimension is not included in the diagram, it is also interconnected with and reinforced by other poverty dimensions. In China, for example, ill-health is one of the root causes of other poverty dimensions (Chen & Pan, 2019). In America, meanwhile, health poverty is attributed mainly to financial, economic and material poverty (Institute for Research on Poverty, n.d.).

For poverty analysis, the multidimensionality and complexity of poverty guide in the selection of poverty worldviews. Poverty is conventionally analysed through income, basic needs and capability worldviews, which, according to Gweshengwe and Hassan (2019), construe poverty differently. These worldviews reflect the multidimensionality and complexity of poverty at a different scale. For poverty analysis, therefore, poverty analysts should select a poverty worldview that satisfactorily reveals all the dimensions of poverty and how the dimensions interlink with and reinforce each other. The choice of a particular poverty worldview is guided by the multidimensionality and complexity of poverty.
3.3. Poverty is individual- and context-specific

In that it is “experienced differently by men and by women and can differ according to a geographical area, social group, and political or economic context” (Ali-Akpajiak & Pyke, 2003, p. 5). Sen and Begum (2008) hold the same view in their assertion that poor people may be distinguished according to “sex, region, occupation, land ownership, housing, education, access to infrastructure and even clothing” (p. 4). People living in poverty are, therefore, not a homogenous group (Ali-Akpajiak & Pyke, 2003; Ayyola et al., n.d.; Chambers, 1994; Sen & Begum, 2008). By way of example, in Nepal, women are poorer and more vulnerable than men; indigenous ethnic (Janajaties) and caste (Dalits) groups are more disadvantaged and poor; and poverty is highly concentrated in rural and mountainous areas (Acharya, 2004; International Monetary Fund, 2003).

The individual- and context-specific nature of poverty also influences the poverty analysis process. It helps poverty analysts to capture variations of the nature and severity of poverty according to age and gender as well as social, cultural, economic, political, environmental and spatial contexts.

3.4. Poverty is either absolute or relative

(Dhongde & Minoiu, 2010; Gandolfi & Neck, 2010; Zongsheng & Yunbo, 2005). Absolute poverty is a condition of acute deprivation in the form of severe food insecurity, premature death, ill-health, illiteracy, homelessness, lack of clothing, etc. (Ikejiaku, 2009; Mowafi & Khawaja, 2005; United Nations, 1996). It is usually measured based on income or nutrition (Gandolfi & Neck, 2010; Zongsheng & Yunbo, 2005). If a person’s income falls below the international poverty line of 1 USD.90 per day, he or she is in absolute poverty. In nutritional terms, an adult male is considered to be in absolute poverty if he eats less than 2500 calories per day (Gandolfi & Neck, 2010). On the other hand, relative poverty is when a person is regarded as poor in comparison to other persons in his or her society (Gandolfi & Neck, 2010; Mowafi & Khawaja, 2005; Rigg, 2018). For example, within the European Union, an individual is considered relatively poor if his or her income is less than 60% of the region’s median income (Belfield et al., 2014; Dhongde & Minoiu, 2010). In Brunei, relative poverty is described as having a quality of life that is below the expected standard of living in the country, which includes having comfortable housing, being well educated and healthy, owning more than one car and earning sufficient income (Gweshengwe, 2020; Gweshengwe et al., 2020; Hassan, 2017).

Knowledge about the absolute or relative nature of poverty is essential to analysis of poverty. People in poverty are commonly classified as “very poor”, “poor” and “near poor or vulnerable” (Alkire et al., 2014; Banerjee et al., 2009; Gweshengwe, 2020). This classification is based on the level or scale of poverty severity. Thus, the absoluteness of poverty helps poverty analysts to understand the severity of poverty, which is vital for poverty classification. The relativeness of poverty facilitates the understanding of the nature of poverty in a given society since it is construed in the space of “the way of life” of that society.

4. Conclusion

This paper examined the characteristics of poverty and their implications for poverty analysis. In summary, the paper found that poverty has a characteristic language and is multidimensional, complex, individual- and context-specific, absolute and/or relative in nature. All these traits of poverty influence poverty analysis.

As regards the language of poverty, each culture uses multiple and varied terminologies to refer to poverty or poor people. In analysing poverty, analysts should therefore begin by understanding the poverty terminologies used by the communities being studied. These terminologies reveal the dimensions and severity of poverty faced by a particular community. Moreover, an understanding local poverty terminologies enables poverty analysts to uphold the dignity of people and helps to minimise misconceptions about poverty in a society. Lastly, the terminologies reveal definitions of poverty that are context-sensitive, which allows poverty analysts to balance context-based and international poverty definitions.
Where the multidimensionality and complexity of poverty are concerned, meanwhile, poverty has financial, economic, social, environmental and seasonal dimensions which interlink and reinforce each other. Knowledge of the multidimensionality and complexity of poverty is essential as it guides the selection of a suitable poverty worldview or space for the analysis of poverty.

As to the individual- and context-specific nature of poverty, this shows how poverty varies according to gender, race and age and how it is shaped by context. Poverty analysis should therefore reveal variations in the nature and severity of poverty according to gender, age and context. Lastly, since poverty is either absolute (acute deprivation) or relative (how poor one is in comparison to other people in a society), knowledge about these aspects of poverty is vital for poverty classification.

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Note
1. Realities, in this study, refer to undesirable life conditions or experiences (deprivations) of poor people (Chambers, 1994, 1995, 2012).

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