

two manifestations of poverty

Common Measures of Poverty

Poverty is a multidimensional concept. It encompasses both the prevailing welfare levels and capabilities (IFAD 2001). Most often it is measured and portrayed in terms of the indicators of current levels of welfare, disregarding the capabilities of the population to sustain and enhance it. As will become clear from the subsequent discussion, this approach to poverty has serious limitations in mountain areas. Levels of welfare are also mostly seen in terms of some economic indicator - income or consumption. Non-economic aspects of welfare and poverty are not necessarily ignored, but it is assumed that those poor in income and consumption terms are poor in other aspects as well, or those able to meet some objectively determined minimum level of consumption expenditure are also able to enjoy other social and political aspects of a decent living. These assumptions are not always valid. Improved income and consumption may be accompanied by higher dependency and lower freedom while a great sense of empowerment and mobility could be had even at low income levels (Jodha 1988). Yet, economic indicators of poverty, specifically private consumption below an objective 'poverty line', have continued to be the most commonly used measures for analysis and policy. The simplest application of the summary economic statistic in this respect has been the 'dollar poverty' concept used by the World Bank to consider all those as poor who have less than one US dollar per day expenditure in constant purchasing power of 1993.

There have been attempts to both sharpen the scalar concept of poverty by going beyond a single income or expenditure indicator or headcount ratio to assess the poverty gap and severity of poverty (WB 1999) and to include socio-political dimensions by the multi-dimensional index of poverty such as the human development index (*a la* UNDP) for different countries and regions or by bringing in aspects like vulnerability, deprivation, lack of freedom and empowerment, and exclusion (Heninger 1999) in the analysis of poverty. Vulnerability defined as the lack of people's capacity to withstand shock (DFID 2000) is considered a basic feature of poverty. So is the lack of autonomy, referring to the capacity to decide and act for oneself and lack of entitlement making people incapable of claiming their customary and legal rights (Harris et al. 1992; Sen 1999). In its latest exposition on poverty, the World Bank views poverty to pertain to the lack of four attributes: opportunity, empowerment, security and capabilities (World Bank 2000). Data on these aspects are often 'soft' and only qualitative, but their incorporation into the understanding of poverty is important, particularly in the case of marginalised mountain people.

Several development and donor organisations have attempted to approach poverty from different dimensions with a view to developing a framework for poverty alleviation according to their own jurisdiction and work orientation. According to the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) people are considered poor when they cannot secure a minimum standard of well-being and when their choices and opportunities for a tolerable life are limited or restricted (UNDP 1997). The World Bank would like to make it more precise in terms of determining a consumption-based poverty line, but recognises that the concept is not sensitive enough to the extent and depth of poverty and would, therefore, like to use measures such as the Poverty Gap (WB 1999). World Food Programme, concerned primarily with ensuring food security for the poor, concentrates on people for whom food supplies are insufficient, implying that they constitute the core of the poor (WFP 2001). The Department for International Development (DFID) of the United Kingdom in its approach to 'sustainable livelihoods' as the basic framework for development and poverty alleviation identifies 'vulnerability' as the key to poverty (DFID 2000).

Each of these and other approaches to defining poverty and identifying the poor are relevant to mountain areas, as is clear from the account of manifestations and sources of poverty in the subsequent sections of this paper, but none of them directly incorporates the specific manifestation of poverty in mountain areas. Limited options for livelihood, food insecurity, and vulnerability are some of the basic features of mountain livelihoods, but their forms and sources are often different from those in other areas. Closest to recognition of the physical location as a correlate and source of poverty is IFAD's operational approach to poverty from different perspectives, such as 'who are the poor?' 'where do the poor live?' 'how do the poor get income and use it?' 'what access do the poor have to assets?' and 'what are the barriers to progress for the poor?' (IFAD 2001), which lists 'high altitude' and 'remote' areas among the ones with high concentrations of poverty.

Poverty is not only a multi-dimensional phenomenon, its manifestations vary across areas and groups of population as well as by levels of development. The poor are mostly identified, in terms of private consumption below an objective 'poverty line', but those considered non-poor in terms of current consumption and income may be poor in terms of capabilities and welfare. Such non-linearities between consumption levels and other aspects of welfare and capabilities are more prominent in mountain areas where variations in access to markets, services, and knowledge can lead to drastically different levels of welfare and capabilities not necessarily reflected in current consumption levels.

Discussions about whether we need separate indicators for poverty and development in mountain areas, or should study them in a comparative framework using common indicators and methodologies, have taken place. The 'mountain perspective' framework argued that mountain areas need a separate frame of analysis because of the specificities that qualitatively distinguish them from the flatlands. On the other hand, there is also a plea to 'apply well established development indicators' such as 'quality of life indicators' in mountain research, even though the 'complex living conditions' and 'great variations' between regions, groups, and households and their members are well recognised (Kreutzmann 2001). This view is contested by others, not so much with the plea that separate indicators are required for mountain areas, but with the argument that 'indicator-driven research', is 'highly aggregated', 'externally imposed' and 'decontextualised'. Emphasis, it is argued, should be not only on building relevant indicators, but also on 'qualitative, informal or cultural contexts' (Rhoades 2001). A more meaningful approach to research into development and poverty in mountain areas lies in, first, examining how common indicators suit the specific conditions in these areas and what modifications are

needed to reflect specificities of location and, then, to identify what additional phenomena and processes need to be examined to account for mountain specificities. Accordingly, an attempt has been made below to examine the appropriateness of conventional economic measures of poverty for portraying economic poverty and to indicate non-economic correlates of poverty as they specifically occur in mountain areas.

Economic Indicators of Poverty: Limitations of Consumption – Production Based Approach

Commonly applied statistical indicators of poverty do not always reflect poverty or its absence in mountain areas. Mountain conditions, terrain, and climate make it absolutely necessary that people have a higher minimum energy and caloric intake, in their food, for survival than in the plains and that they have minimum clothing, including warm clothing and permanent shelter, to protect themselves from the extremities of weather and climate. Use of common consumption norms to measure the well-being of the people in these aspects, therefore, may place many mountain people above the poverty line even though their basic needs have not been fulfilled. Poverty ratios based on consumption, using a common 'poverty line' are likely to indicate that many people who are not able to meet their basic survival needs according to local conditions are non-poor, and thus the 'incidence of poverty' is shown to be lower in mountain areas than even in relatively better-off regions in the plains. Thus incidence of poverty measured as the proportion of the population below the poverty line based on consumption norms was estimated to be lower (41%) in the hills of Nepal than in the Terai (42%) in 1995-96 (HMG/NPC 1998; Upadhyaya 2000), in the North East Hill region (34%) and Jammu and Kashmir (25%) than in India as a whole (36%) in 1993 (Dubey and Kharpuri 1999; Joshi 2000), and in Balochistan (8%) than in the whole of Pakistan (17%) in 1991 (Zia 2000). If a poverty line taking into account (i) higher energy/calorie intake; (ii) greater non-food needs for clothing and shelter for survival; and (iii) higher prices prevalent in mountain areas is adopted, the incidence of poverty, in terms of population suffering from the inability to meet basic needs, would be much higher (for an illustration, see Annex 1).

It may, however, be noted that, even using conventional measures, incidence of poverty in mountain areas is generally found to be higher than in the plains. In Nepal, mountain areas had 56 per cent of its households below the poverty line in 1955-56, compared to 42 per cent in the country as a whole. In the North West Frontier Province, it was estimated to be 20 per cent compared to 17 per cent for Pakistan as a whole. In India, most hill and mountain States showed a higher percentage of households below poverty line (e.g. Arunachal Pradesh [40%], Meghalaya [38%], Nagaland [48%], Sikkim [41%], Himachal Pradesh [39%], than in the entire country [36%] in 1993.

A more important feature of the consumption levels in mountain areas is that they are not always met by local income generation but by remittances, thus making their sustainability rather precarious. Studies from different areas suggest that an average of about 35 per cent of the consumption needs of mountain households are met through remittances (Khanka 1988; Bora 1996). Income estimates, as they are made, measure the income originating and not income accruing, and, in the case of mountain areas, the latter happens to be much smaller than the former due to the extractive nature of several important income-generating activities (e.g. forests, tourism, hydroelectricity, minerals) from which income is produced in the region, but most of it flows elsewhere. Of the income from forests, for example, local retention is estimated to be only around 10-15 per cent. Per capita domestic product was estimated to be about 25 per cent higher, for example, in the case of Himachal and Uttaranchal than the

national average of India, but these estimates go down by about one-third, once income retained in the respective states only is considered (Papola and Joshi 1985; Papola 2000).

Isolation

A poor productive base, limited absorptive capacity, limited linkages to use local produce to strengthen the local economy in a value-adding chain and unfavourable institutional and market mechanisms leading to accentuation of the phenomenon of unequal exchange with other areas are features that are, more or less, common to most poor areas. What makes the situation in mountain areas qualitatively different is their inaccessibility. Lack of access to markets, technologies, and information is not only a cause of their underdevelopment, but is itself a facet of poverty in terms of isolation and non-participation in wider social, political, and economic processes. Improvements in access through development of transport and communication networks and, in recent years, access to knowledge and information through electronic media, while positive developments, in themselves, have made the physical, social and economic isolation of mountain communities more conspicuous to them and others and have added a new dimension to the perception of poverty in a relative sense. Access to information has raised awareness and aspirations, but, unaccompanied by access to resources and opportunities, it has, at the same time, led to frustration and increased consciousness about their poverty among mountain people.

Insecurity and Vulnerability

A limited resource base, further limited by the constraints on its use due to fragility, is a dominant characteristic of mountain areas. While the population density is lower in these areas than in the lowlands, the actually usable, arable land per person is extremely limited and not very fertile. Food insecurity, because of both limited availability and poor fertility of land and difficulty in delivering food from lowland areas, is a common feature in many mountain areas. Access to other resources, such as forests, is mostly restricted by legal and institutional arrangements. Use of non-crop, non-forest, marginal lands, even where permitted, is not very productive because such land is usually degraded and cultivation is often hazardous due to its fragile nature. Infrastructure such as roads, that constitute 'lifelines' for most mountain people, are often not dependable because of natural hazards and blockades. Fragility and a high incidence of natural hazards make the lives of people insecure and vulnerable and often threaten the very means of survival and livelihood such as agricultural lands, crops, and shelters, besides transport and communication channels. In other words, maintenance of livelihoods, even at current levels, is precarious and danger of relapse into poverty is ever imminent.

Social and Political 'Exclusion'

Mountain areas are often located on the periphery of the geographical landscape of nations. They are inhabited by too few people to be politically important. The total population of the HKH region is estimated to be around six per cent (and the area 23%) of the total of all the eight countries within which the region falls (Banskota 2000). Often, most people in the mountains are also socially secluded because of their tribal origins. As a result they find themselves marginalised with limited or no voice, presence, and involvement in national socioeconomic and political processes. This not only results in the absence of their concerns and issues of development in national agenda, but also develops in them a sense of exclusion and deprivation, which adds another, psychological and emotive, dimension to the poverty of mountain people (Sadeque 2000).

Infrastructure and Services: Provision v/s Physical Access

Isolation because of limited physical access to infrastructural services is a distinct feature of mountain areas arising out of the peculiarities of topography and terrain. This is not often reflected in the indicators of infrastructural development commonly used. Road length per thousand of population or even per square kilometre of area, or schools and health posts per thousand of population do not correctly reflect access to these services, as even a high density of these items may still leave many settlements and population groups far away from them. Indicators that reflect the proportion of population within walkable distance can convey the extent of access better. But even such indicators have limitations because of the terrain to be covered. Similar distance to a motorable road, school or health post, in fact, implies less access in mountain areas than in the plains. A kilometre in the mountains is much 'longer' than in the plains in terms of the time and energy taken to travel!

Geographically Endemic Poverty

A distinct dimension of poverty in mountain areas is that it primarily results from the severity of constraints of an unfavourable geographical situation and only secondarily by the resource endowments of individual households. Thus poverty afflicts the entire population of an area more often than only some households in a generally non-poor area. This is not to deny the differences and inequality among households and groups, but they are less glaring than those between accessible and inaccessible areas, on the one hand, and between the mountains and other areas, on the other. In other words, poverty in the mountains is more area-specific than household-specific. This seems to have been well recognised in the poverty alleviation approach adopted in China where 'poor areas', rather than 'poor people' are identified and targeted for development (Banskota and Sharma 1993).

Physical Stress, Hazards and Risks

Among the most visible manifestations of poverty in mountain areas are the strain and drudgery that people, particularly women, have to undergo to eke out a living. Much of the strain is because of the difficulty in procuring basic needs such as water and fuel and basic inputs like fodder for livestock, which are not always available within easy reach and have to be brought from some distance through difficult and hazardous terrain. Various operations in the main productive activity, namely, agriculture, are also no less strenuous as most of them have to be carried out manually. Long hours of work, drudgery, hazards and physical strain are not only results but, in fact, are special dimensions of poverty in mountain areas that are not reflected in any of the conventional indicators.

Wastage of Human Resources

A paradoxical situation is often visible in many mountain areas: in the midst of long hours of back-breaking work and year-round drudgery in household and productive activities, specially among women, there is a lot of idle labour, particularly among men. Studies show that about 45 per cent of person days remain unused, the proportion is much higher at 63 per cent for men than for women at 34 per cent (Bora 1996; Khanka 1988). Women's efforts and energy are mostly spent without commensurate returns, and could be available for more productive and socially useful purposes if technological, economic and institutional solutions were found to reduce the time taken for and drudgery of their work to satisfy basic household needs. Men have little productive work beyond what is 'assigned' to them in the context of so-called gen-

der-based division of labour. Thus most labour is not productively used and is reflected in high incidences of unemployment, underemployment and 'disguised' unemployment, constituting other important aspects of poverty in mountain areas.

Poverty Induced Migration

Lack of productive employment opportunities results in outmigration, mostly of adult males. Mountain areas, as a result, have a much higher incidence of outmigration (estimated to be around 40 per cent among adult males) than areas in the plains, producing multiple impacts on mountain economies and societies. To the extent that migrants send remittances, they help to support their households. Since migrants are mostly males, the sex ratio is 'favourable', particularly in the working population, and there is a higher incidence of women-headed households, sometimes as high as 20 per cent (Acharya 2000). Both these phenomena have concomitant economic and social effects. Although the main occupation, namely, agriculture, does not need all the available workers throughout the year, to the extent that most of them are needed during the short busy seasons, migration results in labour shortages and reduction in agricultural productivity. Thus migration is a multidimensional aspect of poverty in mountain areas; constituting not only a result, but also a cause and manifestation of poverty in itself.