THE DATA CHALLENGES OF MEASURING POVERTY IN AFRICA

The recent flagship report “Poverty in a Rising Africa” focuses on answering the question as to how much growth averaging 4.5% over the past two decades has improved the well-being of Africans as measured by different indicators of human development. To do that, the study tackles first the state of poverty data in the region. While data has improved considerably, there are still data gaps to address. Revisiting the data shows that core indicators of well-being have improved but from a low base and undermined by rapid population growth.

To measure poverty and inequality you need comparable, good-quality surveys that measure household consumption at regular intervals. Tracking poverty in Africa is difficult because the data are deficient on these three domains: availability, comparability, and quality.

On average, countries in Africa conducted 3.8 consumption surveys since 1990 (about half as many as the rest of the developing world), and only 1.6 of them were comparable (map 1). In 2012, only 25 out of 48 countries had conducted at least two consumption surveys over the past decade. And only 27 out of 48 countries had at least two comparable surveys from 1990 to 2012 with which to track poverty trends.

This is an example of the challenges regarding quality: one survey of Nigeria’s poverty rate in 2010 estimated the figure at 26%; another, conducted the same year, put the figure at 53%. With 20% of Africa’s population in Nigeria, this discrepancy makes a big difference in terms of regional estimates. And other data needed to estimate poverty trends (such as data on price changes and GDP) also face critical deficiencies.

Insufficient funding and low capacity only partly explain the weakness of poverty statistics in Africa. Prevailing political arrangements often favor less (or less autonomous) funding for statistics. In some countries, donor financing has replaced domestic financing, but the interests of donors are not always aligned with the interests of governments.

Solutions to the challenge of raising the stock and quality of household surveys to track poverty include alternative financing
models, regional cooperation and peer learning, as well as clearer international standards for poverty measurement. Better data can lead to better decisions and better lives, so this should be a priority in the fight against poverty in Africa.

MAP 1: Lack of comparable survey in Africa makes it difficult to measure poverty trends


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