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Poverty is relative, hunger is absolute:Guest Editorial by Ilan Kelman

Poverty is relative, hunger is absolute
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Researchers, policy makers, and practitioners have debated for decades, if not longer, about poverty’s meaning and how it can be reduced, alleviated, or eliminated. One theme often emerging in these discussions is the challenge of defining poverty.

Definitions involving economic or financial measures are particularly prone to pitfalls. Hidden and usually fallacious assumptions can include the existence and use of a cash economy; the desire or need to purchase consumables or services; or equating material goods and monetary wealth with quality of life.

Irrespective, a convergence frequently occurring is agreement that people are only rich or poor in comparison to others. That is, absolute poverty is challenging to describe or to accept in reality. Some points are obvious, such as goods and services having widely varying costs in different locations, leading to the need to calculate local purchasing power over time. Other points are more subtle, such as claims that spousal abuse and measures of happiness tend to show little difference amongst groups from different monetary income classes.

With poverty being relative, perhaps only having meaning in a comparative sense, does that mean that we cannot know who is poor and rich within wider and deeper understandings of those terms? That potentially goes too far.

If survival—a complicated combination of survival of oneself, one’s kin, and one’s genes—is a goal (which can be disputed from various philosophical, biological, and risk-o-philic stances), then absolute measures exist that make survival possible or impossible. Metabolisms vary, but for many living entities (defined how?), minimum intake rates of oxygen, water, and energy (such as sunlight or food) over a minimum period of time are essential for surviving long enough to reproduce and to ensure survival of offspring to the age where the offspring can reproduce.

Considering human beings, such numbers are difficult to calculate and could always be disputed, but theoretical minimum values exist. For practical purposes, in a real slum or in a real billionaire’s mansions, the needed values are likely to be substantially above the minima. Also for practical purposes, oxygen exists in the air at the respirable proportion of approximately 21%. Hence, the challenge is food and water, with all the associated sectors and ideals such as waste management, choices, empowerment, shelter, justice, community, education, dignity, and livelihoods.

The consequence is to accept poverty as a relative term which can be helpful or unhelpful and which leads to an abundance of meetings, discussion, and papers. In contrast, people die of dehydration and malnutrition because thirst and hunger are absolute. Similarly to deaths from fuel poverty or energy poverty—because people without proper climate control can freeze to death or die from heat-related circumstances—people also die from water poverty, food poverty, and nutrition poverty.



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