Destitution

Who and where are the poorest of the poor?

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In 2014, we have used more extreme MPI indicators to shine a light on hundreds of millions of people who each day face grinding hardships difficult for most of us to imagine: the destitute, or poorest of the poor. The good news is that where data are available, we can see strong progress being made to improve the lives of the destitute, particularly in the poorest countries.

WHAT IS ‘DESTITUTION’?

What constitutes extreme poverty is a hot topic as discussions on the post-2015 development goals intensify. Debates over different poverty lines rage on; if you have $1.25 a day, are you still one of the ‘poorest of the poor’? What if you have $2 a day? How do we know who to focus resources on in order to ensure the poorest are not ‘left behind’?

With a multidimensional measure of poverty, the picture quickly focuses with uncomfortable clarity. Have you watched two of your children – or even more – die? Are you forced to practise open defecation because you have no sanitation? Has no member of your family completed more than a single year at school? And if these occur together, could anyone argue that you are not experiencing an extreme form of poverty?

The Global MPI has always revealed disparities in the intensity of poverty being experienced by those identified as multidimensionally poor. If a person is deprived in one fifth to one third of the weighted indicators the index uses, they are considered ‘Vulnerable to Poverty’. If they are deprived in more than half, they are identified as being in ‘Severe Poverty’.

This year, we also shine a light on the poorest of the poor – the destitute. Those identified as ‘Destitute’ are already MPI poor. In addition, they are deprived in at least one-third of the same weighted indicators, but according to more extreme criteria than those used to identify the MPI poor – including the examples mentioned above (see table). Also, the destitute may possess no assets whatsoever – not even a radio or mobile phone. At least one member of the household may be severely undernourished, and accessing safe drinking water requires a lengthy round-trip of more than 45 minutes.

WHO ARE THE DESTITUTE?

Data on destitution are currently available for 49 of the 108 countries analysed in the Global MPI 2014. These countries cover much of South Asia, including Afghanistan, Bangladesh, India, Nepal and Pakistan. We also have data on vast swathes of Sub-Saharan Africa, covering Burkina Faso, Burundi, Cameroon, Central African Republic, Congo, Cote d’Ivoire, DR Congo, Ethiopia, Gabon, Ghana, Guinea-Bissau, Malawi, Mozambique, Niger, Nigeria, Rwanda, Senegal, Sierra Leone, South Africa, Swaziland, Tanzania, Togo, Uganda and Zimbabwe. Two Arab countries are covered (Iraq and Tunisia), as well as four countries in East Asia and the Pacific (Cambodia, Indonesia, Lao and Vietnam), six from Europe and Central Asia (Armenia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kazakhstan, Macedonia, Serbia and Tajikistan) and eight from Latin America and the Caribbean (Belize, Guyana, Haiti, Honduras, Mexico, Nicaragua, Peru and Suriname).

Key Findings

- **India** is home to 343.5 million destitute people – 28.5% of the population is destitute. And overall in South Asia, over **420 million people** are destitute.

- In **Niger**, **68.8%** of the population is destitute – the highest share of any country. In **Ethiopia** this figure is **58.1%** and **Burkina Faso**, **57.5%**.

- **Nearly three quarters of destitute people** in the countries for which we have data are also in severe MPI poverty: they are deprived in 50% or more of the MPI indicators.

- **Over 638 million people are destitute** across only 49 countries analysed thus far.

- Across these 49 countries **half of MPI poor people are destitute**

- **Ethiopia** reduced the percentage of destitute people 30 percentage points from 2000-2011

- Of the 34 countries for which we have time-series data, **eight of the top ten** performers at tackling destitution were LICs or Least Developed Countries.
 almost 67% have at least one household member who is severely malnourished. More than 46% of the destitute don’t have any household member that has completed even one year of schooling and in 36% of them all primary school-aged children are out of school. Also, more than 71% have no access to electricity and a similar proportion don’t possess even the most basic assets – no bicycle, no radio, no telephone (not even a mobile), no refrigerator, no television, no motorbike; certainly no car or truck. Almost 90% practice open defecation, with all the feelings of shame, fear, insecurity and humiliation that accompany it. In addition, nearly 40% of them don’t have access to safe drinking water or the water source is more than 45 minutes away, roundtrip; more than 83% of the destitute in these countries have inadequate flooring and almost 98% of them use solid cooking fuels for cooking.

Out of all those identified as destitute in our 49 countries, nearly three-quarters of them – 72.8% – also experience severe MPI poverty; in other words they are deprived in at least half of the MPI indicators, as well as one-third of the destitution indicators. Within this limited set of only 49 countries, this condition already affects over 465 million people.1

**Where are the destitute?**

By far the largest number of destitute people – ‘destitute’ – are to be found in India: 28.5% of the population, which is over 340 million people.2 Furthermore, in India, fully 53% of MPI poor people are destitute. If we include the other countries in South Asia for which we have data (Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Nepal and Pakistan), we find that over 420 million people in South Asia are destitute.3 The highest incidence of destitution in South Asia is in Afghanistan, where 37.7% of the population are destitute.

In Sub-Saharan Africa, we have data for only 24 countries but these already house 200 million destitute people. Country

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**Table 1: The deprivation thresholds of those who are both MPI poor and destitute**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dimension</th>
<th>Indicator</th>
<th>Deprived if...</th>
<th>Relative Weight</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Education</strong></td>
<td>Years of schooling</td>
<td>No household member has completed at least one year of schooling (&gt;=1).</td>
<td>1/6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Child School Attendance</td>
<td>No child is attending school up to the age at which they should finish class 6.</td>
<td>1/6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Health</strong></td>
<td>Child Mortality</td>
<td>2 or more children have died in the household</td>
<td>1/6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Nutrition</td>
<td>Severe undernourishment of any adult (BMI&lt;17kg/m²) or any child (-3 standard deviations from the median).</td>
<td>1/6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Living Standard</strong></td>
<td>Electricity</td>
<td>The household has no electricity (no change).</td>
<td>1/18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Improved Sanitation</td>
<td>There is no facility (open defecation).</td>
<td>1/18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Safe Drinking Water</td>
<td>The household does not have access to safe drinking water, or safe water is more than a 45-minute walk (round trip).</td>
<td>1/18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Flooring</td>
<td>The household has a dirt, sand, or dung floor (no change).</td>
<td>1/18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Cooking Fuel</td>
<td>The household cooks with dung or wood (coal/lignite/charcoal are now non-deprived).</td>
<td>1/18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Assets</td>
<td>The household has no assets (radio, mobile phone, etc.) and no car.</td>
<td>1/18</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Bibi Ayesha lives in a box-like structure on stilts near a temple in Delhi, India. Injured in an accident years ago, she is unable to walk and gets around on a hand-pedalled tricycle. For sanitation she relies on government restrooms near her makeshift home, which has no electricity or water. Her flooring is not dirt or sand – although it could hardly be called proper flooring!

She earns a little money by cleaning a nearby homeless shelter and collecting alms in front of the temple, but most of the money is spent on medication for her chronic respiratory condition. What little food she can afford, she cooks over wood on a little mud stove and shares with her mentally ill son.

Bibi is deprived in the shaded indicators shown in her poverty profile, and as such is multidimensionally poor. She is also deprived in 7/18 of the more extreme indicators shown in the table, and is therefore identified as destitute.
that most countries have made more important progress in absolute terms. Rural reductions in destitution were statistically significant in 27 countries, whereas urban reductions were significant only in 20 countries – pointing out a relative urbanization of poverty. In terms of indicators, the majority of the countries registered significant improvements in sanitation and children mortality. This suggests that health and sanitation policies are contributing to improve the lives of the poorest of the poor.

This success in tackling destitution in some of the world’s poorest countries sparks hope that progress is being made, and that concerted efforts post-2015 really can result in there being ‘no one left behind’. For now, destitution – with all the grinding hardship, pain and privations it entails – remains a reality for hundreds of millions of people, and an issue on which policymakers the world over must surely set clear sights.

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NOTES
1. Note that nearly a third of destitute people – 32% in these countries – are deprived in 50% or more of the destitution indicators. This is 204 million people across these 49 countries. Of these, 101 million live in India, and 126 million in our 5 South Asian countries.
2. All population aggregates for the 49 countries use 2010 population data (UNDESA 2013). Note that India’s NFHS data were most recently collected in 2005/6; newer data, when available, may lower these estimates.
3. As additional countries from other regions are added, this is likely to diminish.
4. These 71 datasets have been harmonized for strict comparability, exactly.
5. Reduction in the destitution MPI was
6. The relative rate of change is the difference in levels across two periods as a percentage of the initial period. The annualized relative rate of change is the compound rate of reduction per year between the initial and the final periods.
7. According to the DAC figures for 2012 and 2013 aid flows.
8. Significant by $t \alpha=0.05$. In Bangladesh and Ethiopia this reduction was significant in both periods of comparison.

REFERENCES