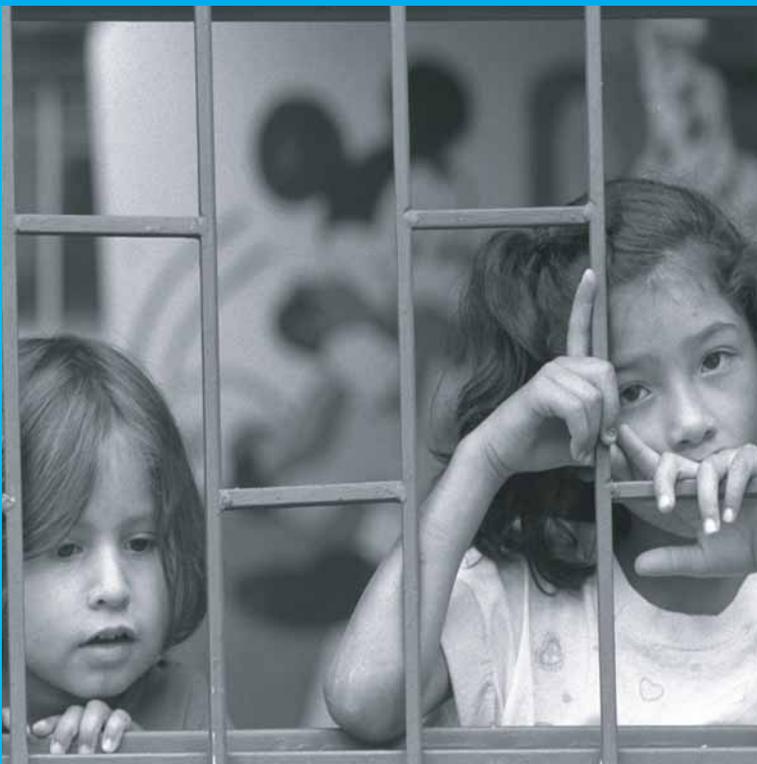


# INCIDENCE, DEPTH AND SEVERITY OF CHILDREN IN POVERTY

WORKING PAPER



DIVISION OF  
POLICY AND PLANNING  
OCTOBER 2005



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**OCTOBER 2005**

**Incidence, Depth and Severity of Children in Poverty.**

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## **Executive Summary**

Recently, the first ever estimate of the number of children living poverty in developing countries was undertaken. The incidence of child poverty was estimated by establishing how many children suffer severe deprivation in at least one out of seven indicators which are internationally recognized as their rights as well as constitutive of poverty. This is a major step forward in the analysis of poverty. In this Working Paper, we generalize these findings on the incidence of children living in poverty by exploring how to estimate the depth and severity of child poverty.

Two countries can have the same proportion of children living in poverty; however, the actual plight of children could be very different depending on how many deprivations, on average, children suffer. In addition, even if they suffer from the same average number of deprivations, these deprivations could be the same for all children or be very unevenly distributed. We show how these considerations can be used to estimate the depth and severity of poverty. We use regional data to provide applied examples of this methodology.

The method proposed in this Working Paper is similar to the one used to estimate the incidence, depth and severity of income poverty. The paper also offers some possible generalizations and ways forward for future research.

## **Resumen ejecutivo**

La primer estimación del número de niños y niñas viviendo en situación de pobreza en los países en desarrollo fue realizada recientemente. La incidencia de la pobreza infantil se estimó basándose en cuantos niños y niñas sufren deprivación severa en al menos uno de siete indicadores que son internacionalmente reconocidos como sus derechos y constituyentes de pobreza. Este ha sido un paso importante en el análisis de la pobreza. En este Documento de Trabajo generalizamos estos resultados sobre incidencia explorando como estimar la profundidad y severidad de la pobreza infantil.

Dos países pueden tener la misma estimación de pobreza infantil, pero su situación puede ser muy distinta dependiendo de cuantas deprivaciones sufren, en promedio, los niños y las niñas. Además, aun con el mismo numero de deprivaciones en promedio, estas pueden ser las mismas para todos los niños y niñas o pueden estar distribuidas en forma muy desigual. En el Documento de Trabajo mostramos como estas consideraciones pueden usarse para estimar la profundidad y severidad de la pobreza. Usamos datos regionales para proveer ejemplos de esta metodología.

La metodología que se propone en este Documento de Trabajo es similar a la utilizada para estimar la incidencia, profundidad y severidad de la pobreza por ingreso. El trabajo también ofrece posibles generalizaciones y como continuar investigaciones futuras.

## Résumé analytique

La première estimation du nombre d'enfants vivant en situation de pauvreté dans les pays en voie de développement a été réalisée récemment. Le taux de pauvreté des enfants est estimé sur la base du nombre de garçons et de filles qui souffrent d'au moins une privation sévère parmi sept indicateurs reconnus internationalement comme leur droits, et sont constitutifs de la pauvreté. Ce mode de calcul a été un pas important dans l'analyse de la pauvreté. Dans ce document de travail, nous nous proposons de généraliser ces résultats en explorant comment estimer la profondeur et la sévérité de la pauvreté des enfants.

Deux pays peuvent en effet présenter le même taux d'enfants pauvres, mais la situation de ceux-ci peut être très différente selon le nombre de privations dont souffrent en moyenne les garçons et les filles. De plus, si ces pays ont un même nombre de privations en moyenne, les privations peuvent néanmoins toucher tous les enfants de manière égale dans l'un tandis que dans l'autre, les privations peuvent être distribuées d'une façon très inégale. Dans ce document de travail, nous montrons comment utiliser ces considérations afin d'estimer la profondeur et sévérité de la pauvreté. Nous utilisons des données régionales pour donner des exemples d'application pratique de cette méthodologie.

La méthodologie proposée dans ce document de travail est semblable à celle utilisée pour estimer le taux, la profondeur et la sévérité de la pauvreté en termes de revenus. Le document présente aussi d'autres généralisations, et propose des pistes pour des recherches futures.



# INCIDENCE, DEPTH AND SEVERITY OF CHILDREN IN POVERTY.<sup>1</sup>

## Introduction

Recently, the first ever estimate of the number of children living poverty in developing countries was undertaken (Gordon et al, 2003, see also UNICEF, 2004). This is a major step forward in the analysis of poverty.

In this note, we intend to briefly explore the contours of this contribution with the purpose of expanding its findings. This is important not only to further the understanding of the particular plight of children in poverty and solutions to address this situation, but also to highlight elements which could be applied to the analysis of poverty in general.

The presentation is done in three steps. First, a summary of the results from the analysis of the incidence of poverty is provided. Second, an empirical evaluation of the depth and severity of child poverty in developing regions is introduced. Third, to conclude, some possible generalizations and extensions are discussed.

## 1. How many children live in poverty in developing countries?

Gordon et al (2003) estimate that, in developing countries, 1 billion children are severely deprived of at least one of the following seven elements: drinking water, sanitation, nutrition, health, shelter, education, or information. This represents about half of the population under 18 years of age. They arrive at this result using data from household surveys available from 46 countries<sup>2</sup>. Their approach is a variant of the basic needs<sup>3</sup> approach to poverty measurement, where households (and the children therein) were considered living in poverty depending on insufficient access to each of the seven elements representing various rights of children.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> A slightly modified version of this paper, with the title “Children Living Only with Their Mothers—Are They Disadvantaged?”, was published in *Human Rights and Social Policies for Children and Women: Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys (MICS) In Practice*, A. Minujin, E. Delamonica and M. Komarecki (editors) published by The New School University, 2005. Comments to Alberto Minujin ([aminujin@unicef.org](mailto:aminujin@unicef.org)) or Enrique Delamonica ([edelamonica@unicef.org](mailto:edelamonica@unicef.org)). Comments and support from Marianne Fahs, Gaspar Fajth and Elizabeth Gibbons as well as the assistance of Sita Haldipur are greatly appreciated. All errors are our sole responsibility.

<sup>2</sup> Data from Demographic Health Survey (DHS) and, for China, the China Health and Nutrition Surveys were used.

<sup>3</sup> Streeten et al (1981), Streeten (1984), Beccaria and Minujin (1988). See also Boltvinik (1997).

<sup>4</sup> For lack of space, in this paper we concentrate only one aspect of the measurement of children living in poverty, the integrated measurement of incidence, depth and severity of child poverty. Issues related to structural determinants of poverty, child participation, difference in culture and context, perception of poverty by children, social exclusion, vulnerability, emotional and non-material needs of children, etc are not addressed although they are very important. Discussion of these can be found, among others in Christian Children’s Fund (2003), UNICEF (2004), Hart (1992), Kahn and Kamerman (2002), Lister (2003), Plaisance (1996), Lagrée (1996), Haveman and Bershader (2002), Gore and Figueiredo (1997).



houses suffering from severe deprivation are very similar. Thus in looking at the incidence of poverty by households, no great distortion is introduced.

Table 1: Distribution of severe deprivation at individual and household level

Region	Children		Households	
	%	Number (000s)	%	Number (000s)
Sub-Saharan Africa	83	264,460	84	82,336
South Asia	82	459,444	81	157,077
Middle East & North Africa	65	99,354	62	27,898
Latin America & Caribbean	35	68,493	30	24,277
East Asia & Pacific	23	137,054	20	65,518
<b>Developing World</b>	<b>56</b>	<b>1,028,804</b>	<b>48</b>	<b>357,107</b>

Source: Gordon et al (2003)

## 2. Depth

The results reported in the previous section correspond to what is usually considered the incidence of poverty, i.e. the percentage of people whose income is below a certain threshold (the poverty line), within the money metric approach to estimating poverty. In this case, the incidence corresponds to the percentage of children who suffer from at least one deprivation. This is a typical application of the basic needs approach to measuring poverty.

It is well known and widely agreed that the incidence of poverty is only one aspect of poverty.<sup>8</sup> Besides the incidence, authors have explored questions relating to how poor (how far from the poverty line) are the poor on average? Another important question is how poor are the poorest of the poor? These questions can be answered within a simple framework when dealing with a poverty line. However, it is not clear how this can be done when dealing with basic needs. Table 2 presents the basic information (by region) which is needed to answer the above questions within the basic needs approach.

Table 2: Severity of deprivation for households with children (%)

Number of deprivations	Developing world	Sub-Saharan	South Asia	Middle East & North	Latin America &	East Asia & Pacific

<sup>8</sup> See, e.g., Watts (1968), Lipton and Ravallion (1995), Sen (1987), Atkinson (1979), May (2001), Hagenaars (1986), Blackwood and Lynch (1994) and Gordon and Spicker (1998).

		<b>Africa</b>		<b>Africa</b>	<b>Caribbean</b>	
<b>0 (Not poor)</b>	52	16	19	38	70	80
<b>At least 1</b>	48	84	81	62	30	20
<b>1</b>	16	16	18	22	15	14
<b>2</b>	12	19	23	16	8	4
<b>3</b>	10	19	21	12	4	1
<b>4</b>	6	16	13	8	2	1
<b>5</b>	3	10	5	3	1	-
<b>6</b>	1	4	1	1	-	-
<b>7</b>	-	1	-	-	-	-
<b>Total</b>	100	100	100	100	100	100

Source: Gordon et al (2003)

Comparing the first two columns it can be seen that child poverty in sub-Saharan Africa is worse than the developing world average (the incidence being 48 per cent and 84 per cent respectively). Also, visually, it is straightforward to notice that not only are there more children who suffer at least one deprivation (i.e. incidence) but some children actually suffer all seven deprivations. This extent of deprivation does not exist in the other regions.

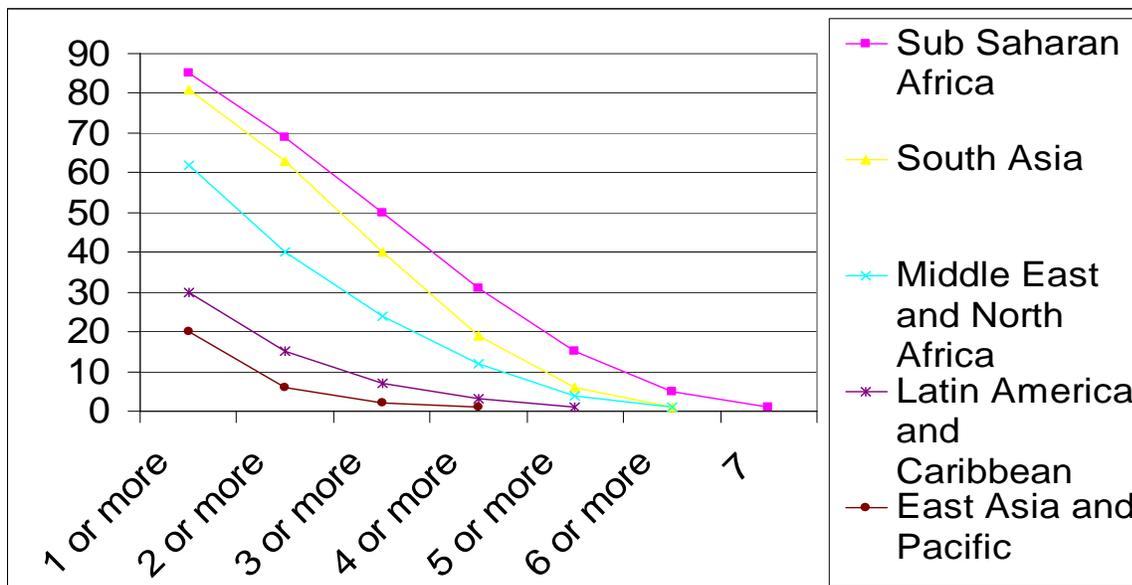
Also, while 15 per cent of the children in sub-Saharan Africa live in households where at least 5 deprivations exist<sup>9</sup>, only 4 percent of the children in the Middle East and North Africa region are deprived to the same degree. While 1 per cent of the children in the East Asia and Pacific region suffer from 4 or more deprivations, in South Asia this group represents 19 per cent of the children.

Figure 2 summarizes the information on the distribution of deprivations in different households by region. It clearly shows that besides difference in incidence, the depth of child poverty (i.e. the fact that many children suffer from multiple deprivations) varies considerably among regions.

Figure 2: Percentage of households with children suffering from 1 or more deprivations

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<sup>9</sup> I.e. 10 for 5, 4 for 6, and 1 for 7.



Source: Gordon et al (2003)

The next step, then, is to construct an indicator that would represent these observations with a numerical index. Ideally, such an indicator would also be easy to interpret intuitively and would be comparable to the notion of depth of poverty as developed by Foster, Greer, and Thorbecke (1984).

Such an indicator would be the average number of deprivation suffered by children in a given country (or region). For the developing world, this indicator is 1.15. It can be read as: children in developing countries live in households where they suffer, on average, from 1.15 deprivations. The average numbers of deprivations in each region are indicated in the graphs in appendix 2. The variation among regions is noticeable.

While in East Asia, there are no households with children with 5 or more deprivations, in South Asia and in Middle East and North Africa 6 and 4 per cent, respectively, of the households suffer 5 or more deprivations. The average numbers of deprivations are: 0.3 (East Asia), 1.4 (M. East and N. Africa) and 2.1 (South Asia). In the same way, while in Latin America and the Caribbean children live in households which, on average, suffer less than 1 deprivation, in Sub-Saharan Africa they suffer from 2.6 deprivations. This comparison illustrates the depth of child poverty.

### 3. Severity

It is well known that averages hide important differences. Thus, in the developing countries, about half the children live in poverty, but this number obscures the fact that in Sub-Saharan Africa the percentage surpasses 80 per cent but in East Asia and the Pacific it represents less than a quarter of all children. Similarly, the example in Table 3 shows a hypothetical case of two regions with the same incidence of child poverty (i.e. the same overall percentage of deprived children) as well as the same depth (i.e. with the same average number of deprivations), but where the severity is different, as indicated by the percentage of children far away from the

average, or the percentage of children who suffer more deprivations in one region than in the other one.

Table 3: Hypothetical example of two regions with the same incidence and depth but different severity of child poverty.

Number of deprivations	Region	0	1	2	3	4
Households suffering from deprivations	A	10	3	6	1	0
Households suffering from deprivations	B	10	4	5	0	1

In each region there are 20 children. In both cases, half the children suffer from at least one deprivation. The average number of deprivations suffered by children is also the same in the two examples. In region A, there are 3 children suffering from 1 deprivation (i.e. there are 3 deprivations), six children suffering 2 deprivations (i.e. “12 deprivations”), and a child suffering 3 deprivations. This gives a total of 18 deprivations. Out of 20 children, this results in almost one deprivation per child, or an average of 0.9 deprivations. In region B, on average, children also live in households where 0.9 deprivations are present.<sup>10</sup>

However, the situations are different, as evidenced by the existence of a child suffering from 4 deprivations in one region but not in the other. Certainly, this greater degree of severity needs to be captured. It would be simple, when averaging the number of deprivations, to “add weight” (i.e. importance) to the children who suffer more deprivations. This would be similar to the transformations in the FGT index for income poverty. For example, each term in the average described in the previous paragraph could be multiplied by the number of deprivations corresponding to that term, i.e. the deprivation of children suffering one deprivation will stay the same, but the children suffering two deprivations would be “counted twice” and those suffering three deprivations would be “counted thrice”, etc.<sup>11</sup> For the two hypothetical cases in Table 3, the indicator would be 1.8 and 2.0, showing the severity in region B being worse than in region A.

Such a measure is commendable in that it is similar to the standard practice in the analysis of income poverty. However, its interpretation is not very intuitive. The percentage of children who

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<sup>10</sup> There are 4 children suffering from 1 deprivation (i.e. there are 4 deprivations), five children suffering 2 deprivations (i.e. “10 deprivations”), and a child suffering 4 deprivations. This gives a total of 18 deprivations, out of 20 children.

$$\sum_{i=1}^{i=N} x_i \cdot d_i^h$$

<sup>11</sup> The general formula for this index would then be:  $\frac{\sum_{i=1}^{i=N} x_i \cdot d_i^h}{N}$ , where  $x_i$  is a dichotomous variable (1 if the child is deprived and 0 if the child is not deprived,  $N$  is the sample size, and  $d$  is the number of deprivations. When  $h = 0$ , the index just tallies how many children suffer from at least one deprivation. When  $h = 1$ , the average number of deprivations per child (the “depth” of poverty) is obtained. When  $h = 2$ , the weighted average described in the text is calculated.

suffer from at least one deprivation (the “incidence” of children living in poverty, 50 per cent in the hypothetical example above) is a clear measure, which every person can easily interpret. The idea that, on average children suffers from a certain number of deprivations (the “depth” of child poverty, 0.9 in the hypothetical example) is also intuitively acceptable. However, 1.8 and 2.0 neither are not actual deprivations nor are they percentages of children. It would be particularly difficult to convey the meaning of this metric to policy-makers and the general public.<sup>12</sup>

Thus, alternative measures which convey the idea of how close or far away children are from the average number of deprivations are needed. A simple way to accomplish this is by comparing the average number of deprivations with the most common one (the mode) or the number of deprivations which separates the lower half (the median) or a quarter (the bottom quartile) of children with the most deprivations.

The problem with this way of measuring the severity of poverty is that the situation of the poorest children could improve, without the indicator showing the improvement. For example, if children suffering from 6 deprivations become deprived of “only” 5 elements but are still among the poorest 25 per cent of the children. Consequently, an index which allows for changes when the real situation of children in poverty changes is needed. Although the weighted average presented above does accomplish this, the search is for an indicator that would provide these changes while also being easy to interpret.

A common measure of variability around the average is the standard deviation. This is an average of the distances between each observation and the average value. The graphs in appendix 2 also show the result of adding a standard deviation to the average number of deprivations. For the developing countries as a whole, the standard deviation is 1.5. This means that the severity of child poverty would be 2.65 (given that the average number of deprivations is 1.15).<sup>13</sup>

An interesting complement to this measure is the percentage of children who suffer from more than 2.65 deprivations. If the deprivations were following a normal distribution among all children, around a sixth (16.6 per cent) of the children would be found suffering from 2.65 deprivations. However, deprivations are not strictly distributed as the normal model would describe. Thus, 20 per cent of the children suffer from more than 2.65 deprivations<sup>14</sup>. Appendix 2 also shows these percentages for each region. They range between 15 and 24 per cent and, across regions, average 18 per cent<sup>15</sup>. Of course, this complementary number will not vary much from country (region) to country (region) because it is a relative percentage. So one possible reading of the severity index is: “roughly one sixth of the children suffer from at least 2.65

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<sup>12</sup> One of the virtues of the approach to measure children living in poverty developed by Gordon et al (2003) is that it not only illustrates the magnitude of the problem, but also allows to find the areas (health? education? shelter? etc) where the problems are more pressing. This is crucial for an informed debate by the public and concomitantly an evidence-based decision by policy-makers.

<sup>13</sup> For the hypothetical example in Table 3, the severity of child poverty is 1.9 for the first row and 2.0 for the second one.

<sup>14</sup> I.e. 10 per cent of the households with children suffer exactly 3 deprivations, 6 per cent suffer 4, 3 per cent suffer 5, and 1 per cent suffer 6. The total is 20 per cent. None suffer all 7 deprivations (See table 2).

<sup>15</sup> This is an unweighted average which tries to get a sense, by region, if the estimate is far or close to the theoretical 16 per cent.

deprivations”. Although mathematically inexact, it is a better expression than: “2.65 is the number of deprivations when the standard deviation is added to the average number of deprivations”

### **3.1. Conclusions: Extensions and generalizations**

It seems that until recently, no attempt was made to pursue the analysis of depth and severity of poverty within the basic needs approach as discussed in the previous section. In this paper we have indicated how this can be done. It would be easy to generalize this approach to adult and overall poverty.

Although our approach does not provide a single valued index, it does provide a single method to assess the well being of children in a way which is consistent and comparable both with their rights and with income-based estimates of poverty. Unlike the implicit differential importance given to different rights in an index, the direct measurement of deprivation soused here gives equal importance to all the rights included in the poverty measure. Moreover, by virtue of the same approach being used to estimate the incidence, depth and severity of the children living in poverty, a more comprehensive view is provided<sup>16</sup>. Thus, we can say that roughly half the children from developing countries live in households where at least one deprivation is present (the incidence of child poverty). In addition, we can now say that on average each child suffers 1.15 deprivations (depth) and than about 20 percent of the children suffer more than 2 deprivations (severity).

Also, a few limitations of this approach may need to be highlighted, in order to lay the ground for future research and extensions. First, no attempt is made to incorporate a sense of the intensity of each single deprivation. In other words, a possible extension to deal with continuous deprivations should be explored. For instance, for education, the indicator is whether the child has ever attended school. Nevertheless, attending one year is not the same as attending three or ten years. However, all of these situations are treated as if they were the same in our approach.

Secondly, we try to quantify something that is inherently very difficult, if not impossible, to quantify. The whole analysis is based on the assumption that each of the seven deprivations represent violations of rights, what Hunt et al (2002) consider constitutive rights. Consequently, they are incommensurable, i.e. it is not possible to say that being malnourished is worse or better than being uneducated. Nevertheless, we “add” the violations when we explore the depth and severity, as we say that suffering from three violations is worse than suffering from “only” two of them. However, our approach recognizes that deprivations cumulate and that is what is being represented by our severity index, even if it does not take into account the interaction among the different deprivations.

Finally, our measure of depth is similar to the interpretation of depth for income poverty. It represents the “number” of deprivations<sup>17</sup> that need to be “fixed” to lift all children out of

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<sup>16</sup> As it is done with the Foster-Greer- Thorbecke measure of income poverty.

<sup>17</sup> The relationship between our indicators and child rights is clearly delineated by Landman (2004) when he refers to the traditional social indicators used in development studies: “While not providing a direct measure of rights protection *per se*, such measures can elucidate the degree to which governments support activities that have an impact on human rights.”(p. 925)

poverty. Thus, for developing countries, no child would be living in poverty if “one more service” (actually a bit more as the depth is 1.15) were available for each of them. Moreover, the underlying data would also allow saying which the “missing services” are (e.g. whether nutrition or shelter deprivations are more widespread<sup>18</sup>). This could guide policy by providing evidence on which to prioritize intervention while following human rights principles.

## 4. Appendices

### 4.1. Appendix 1: Indicators and definitions for child poverty (verbatim from Gordon et al, 2003)

The thresholds used to determine severity of deprivation for each indicator were:

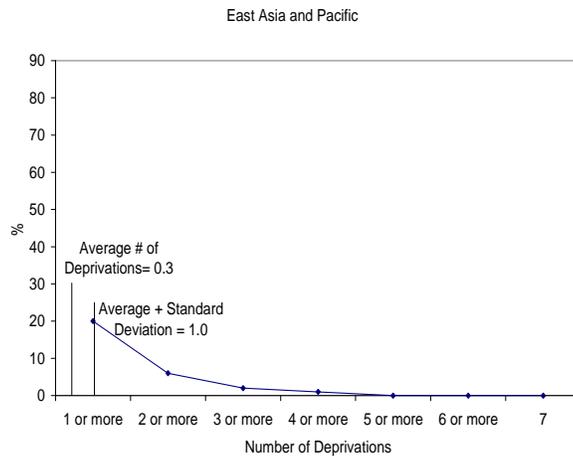
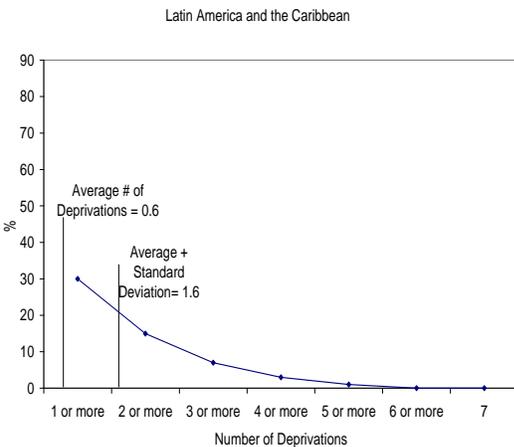
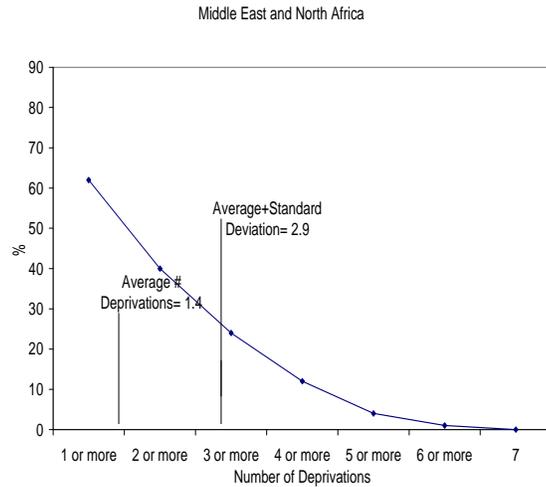
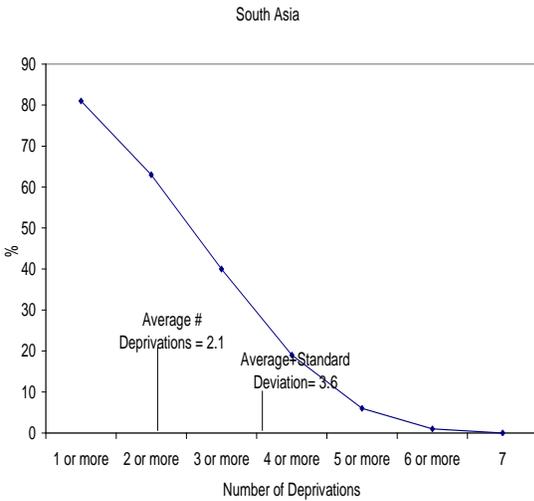
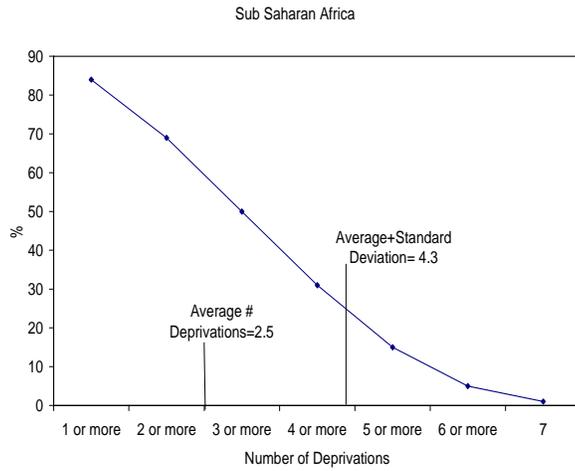
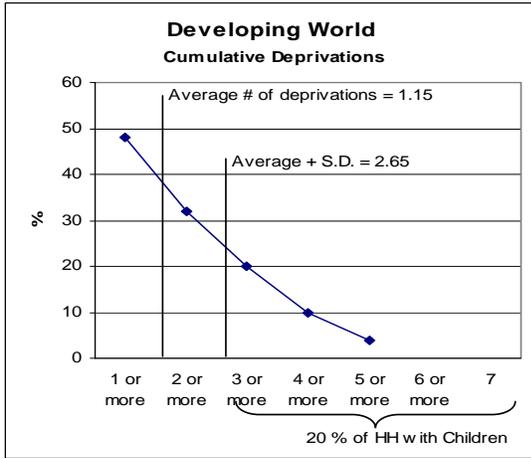
- 1) **Severe nutrition deprivation:** children whose heights and weights for their age were more than -3 standard deviations below the median of the international reference population i.e. severe anthropometric failure.
- 2) **Severe water deprivation** - children who only had access to surface water (e.g. rivers) for drinking or who lived in households where the nearest source of water was more than 15 minutes away (e.g. indicators of severe deprivation of water quality or quantity).
- 3) **Severe deprivation of sanitation facilities** – children who had no access to a toilet of any kind in the vicinity of their dwelling, e.g. no private or communal toilets or latrines.
- 4) **Severe health deprivation** – children who had not been immunised against any diseases or young children who had a recent illness involving diarrhoea and had not received any medical advice or treatment.
- 5) **Severe shelter deprivation** – children in dwellings with more than five people per room (severe overcrowding) or with no flooring material (e.g. a mud floor).
- 6) **Severe education deprivation** – children aged between 7 and 18 who had never been to school and were not currently attending school (e.g. no professional education of any kind).
- 7) **Severe information deprivation** – children aged between 3 and 18 with no access to, radio, television, telephone or newspapers at home.

Thus, the measures used are typically indicative of much more severe deprivation than the indicators frequently published by international organisations. For example, ‘no schooling’ instead of ‘non-completion of primary school’, ‘no sanitation facilities’ instead of ‘unimproved sanitation facilities’, ‘no immunisations of any kind’ instead of ‘incomplete immunisation against common diseases’, ‘malnutrition measured as anthropometric failure below -3 standard deviations from the reference population median’ instead of ‘below -2 standard deviations from the reference median’, etc.

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<sup>18</sup> The survey data used to calculate the incidence, depth and severity of poverty also provide information about rural-urban, administrative units (i.e. provinces), and other ways to disaggregate data in order to find where efforts could be focused first in order to apply the principle of progressive realization (Hunt et al, 2002)

## 4.2. Appendix 2



Source: Own calculations from data in Gordon et al (2003)

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