

issues regarding privacy, security, and censorship associated with “Big Tech” and media in general. For many citizens, maintaining individual freedoms and liberties that they once took for granted are now their greatest concerns, and not strengthening the public and private institutions that have accumulated increasing power, influence, and outright control over them in too many societies.

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Measuring Poverty around the World

Anthony Atkinson

Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019 (429 pages)

In his final book before his passing, Anthony Atkinson has distinguished himself again as a leading expert on the statistical measurement of poverty, and he has demonstrated an impressive knowledge of various statistical methodologies in use in different countries. As a former economist who worked in the area of methodology and statistical analysis at the Bureau of Economic Analysis (BEA), I especially admired the author’s meticulous effort in chapter 4, where he discusses data availability and the challenges of developing good data. Atkinson lays out a comprehensive poverty checklist, which provides guidance on questions that one should ask in those areas that still require more of our attention in the pursuit of developing higher quality poverty statistics, whether globally or nationally. These areas include data comparability across time, data comparability between countries, the measurement of price changes, sample coverages, and triangulation of estimates with other sources. Atkinson argues that solving these data challenges allows for the effective translation of the concepts of poverty into concrete measures. Although unmatched in his expertise in data analysis, Atkinson shows his humility and appreciation for the data collection efforts of others, saying, “It is easy for me, sitting comfortably in Oxford, to criticise the data that are collected. The hard work is done in statistical offices” (125).

Atkinson meticulously compares measurements gathered at the national level by various national statistical offices with equivalent data published by the World Bank. In his view, this comparison is important for two reasons. First, by disaggregating the data back from global to local estimates, the nature of poverty becomes clearer and gains local relevance given the inherent diversity in what poverty means across countries with completely different levels of material well-being. Second, the data comparison provides an important guide for those interested in regional or country-specific case studies. Related to this, my only disappointment in the book was that Atkinson was not able to finish the work, and the editors who took over where he left off left incomplete the chapters on poverty by region: Asia, Latin America, and Africa (chaps. 6–8). It appears that in these chapters Atkinson’s purpose was to examine the national reports of various countries in these regions to illustrate that the measurement of poverty is never straightforward.

While Atkinson states several aims in producing his book, I will emphasize two. First, he highlights global progress in reducing poverty, but argues that when poverty is examined at a more disaggregate level, especially with a focus on the rich countries, a distinct picture emerges. In chapter 9, for example, he presents evidence that while poverty in rich countries has not risen, there has been only a minimal reduction. In the United States and in Canada, the poverty rate only fell by 0.4 and zero percentage points, respectively, in a thirty-year span (between 1984 and 2014). The economic development literature on poverty in high-income countries remains relatively small, and one could erroneously conclude that these countries' role in tackling poverty or their economic development is complete. Second, in chapter 4, Atkinson calls our attention to understanding who is missing from the poverty measurements. Missing data can result from definitional misclassifications such as when live-in servants are not treated or counted as members of the household. Additionally, the excluded may include members of mobile populations such as guest workers, migrants, and those living in war zones or dangerous areas. Such omissions may affect not only the measurement of monetary poverty but also nonmonetary poverty. This distinction reminds me of Mother Teresa who said, "There's two kinds of poverty. We have the poverty of material ... where the people are hungry for a loaf of bread—real hunger. But there is a much deeper, much greater hunger ... that terrible loneliness and being unwanted ... being abandoned by everybody." Atkinson's approach to accurately measuring these "missing" individuals ensures their own governments abandon or ignore fewer people.

In chapter 1, Atkinson explores three positions regarding whether we should be concerned with the poor. First, the isolationist position, an extreme view, focuses exclusively on the well-being of individual citizens within the national borders, assigning no weight to the plight of the poor in other countries. This implies a degree of empathy only toward one's fellow neighbor. Atkinson mentions that his book is not for readers who favor this position. At the other extreme is the global cosmopolitan position, which equally weighs the well-being of each individual, regardless of geography. To describe this approach, Atkinson appropriately quotes the philosopher Peter Singer, "It makes no moral difference whether the person I help is a neighbour's child ten yards away from me or a Bengali ... ten thousand miles away" (13). In the middle of these two extremes, lies the "extended but limited" approach that recognizes the importance of a reduction in poverty around the world, with a limitation that this approach assigns weights based on a comparison of the relative well-being across individuals.

At various points throughout the book, I wondered if Atkinson had lived through the COVID-19 pandemic would he have updated his book to include a discussion on the following two questions:

1. Did COVID-19 change considerably the composition of the poor population?
2. Based on the capability approach, did COVID-19 increase the socially determined requirements needed for adults to work or for children to attend school?

The former question arose in my mind in the context of his discussion, in chapter 9, of the Great Recession. The latter question came to mind in two places in chapter 2: first, in the context of his discussion on identifying the characteristics that secure the desired level of capabilities that underpin the well-being of an individual; and second, I again thought of this in the context of his reference to the linen-shirt example proposed by Adam Smith to denote the degree of poverty of a worker. In furthering our understanding on the measurement of poverty, it is a great loss to not see Atkinson's perspective on the effects of the global pandemic.

The book's editors and Atkinson's two colleagues, John Micklewright and Andrea Brandolini, contributed with two chapters on poverty, inequality, and climate change. Overall, Atkinson masterly taught us that poverty is nonstatic and its measurement requires new approaches and a refocus on what has been missing from the story. Atkinson provides an excellent guide to approach poverty measurement in new ways of thinking, and his contribution is likely to pave the way to new research.

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