Poverty and Perception in Jamaica: A Comparative Analysis of Jamaican Households. Warren A. Benfield. Kingston: UWI Press, 2010. 185 pp. (Paper US\$ 27.00)

Since the early 1990s there has been an ongoing creative tension between “absolutist” income- or consumption-base measurements of poverty and subjective understandings of what it means to be poor. In many instances this tension has resulted in a shared conception of the value of combining approaches to measuring and analyzing poverty. This happened notably during the 1990s when World Bank Poverty Assessment literature began combining standardized money-metric poverty data with participatory poverty assessments that analyzed poverty and its determinants from the perspective of the people themselves.

There have also periodically been attempts to explain what it is that makes people subjectively define themselves as poor when according to the official poverty line they are not. In this vein, Jamaican social scientist Warren Benfield seeks to fill a gap in Caribbean literature by comparing the consumption-based poverty levels from the Jamaica Survey of Living Conditions (JSLC) with subjective, self-assessed poverty levels derived from a qualitative survey implemented in communities where participatory poverty assessments had also been conducted.

Having identified significant differences in the incidence of poverty according to whether an objective or subjective measurement is used, Benfield analyzes a range of social variables, including educational attainment, sex of household head, and child dependency ratio, to see which of these variables correlate most closely with incidences of “incorrect” self-assessed poverty. Using these correlates, he then speculates on why these objectively non-poor households might consider themselves poor. He suggests, for instance, that female-headed households that are not “objectively” poor may nonetheless be more vulnerable to economic and social shocks, because of increased dependence on social programs and remittances. Based on the correlations analysis he goes on to make some working policy recommendations, including improving educational enrollment, educating parents on the importance of school, and introducing social regulation of family size through fostering.

Benfield opens the door to a valuable debate by inviting readers to rethink the way that analysts and policy makers conceptualize and tackle poverty.

He argues that “focusing on the reasons *why* households are poor or classify themselves as poor may point to more fundamental policy options that may reduce or eliminate poverty rather than merely offsetting it” (p. 8, my emphasis). That said, Benfield is explicit that his goal is not to combine data but to “analyse both sets of data to learn what is different from objective and subjective approaches” (p. 16). Yet by venturing into an interpretive discussion of possible causes and solutions to subjective poverty he raises expectations about what the book can deliver. While acknowledging that “greater use of participatory poverty assessment data would have been an asset” (p. 10), he has to fall back on bivariate correlations to inform his poverty and policy analysis. These correlations lack the explanatory power of qualitative and participatory research. Furthermore his policy recommendations are solely based on variables that can be measured in a household survey, which means that he excludes from his policy analysis other fundamental structural dimensions of poverty: the skewed institutions and power imbalances that limit opportunities, perpetuate inter-generational poverty, and restrict social mobility in Jamaica. Although vulnerability is briefly discussed, the book also lacks an analytical framework that would have been helpful in interpreting and explaining subjective experiences of poverty and justifying policy recommendations.

Poverty and Perception in Jamaica is an encouraging and enlightening first step in comparing objective and subjective poverty in Jamaican households. There is a great opportunity now to undertake what Benfield calls a “cause-based approach [to] fundamental policy options” (p. 8) by integrating the explanatory power of qualitative insights into poverty and policy analysis.

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