

CONFERENCE OF EUROPEAN STATISTICIANS

For discussion and  
recommendations

Meeting of the 2021/2022 Bureau  
Geneva (online), 13-14 October 2021

Item II (a) of the Provisional  
Agenda

**IN-DEPTH REVIEW OF SUBJECTIVE POVERTY MEASURES**

**Prepared by Statistics Poland**

*This in-depth review was mandated by the CES Bureau and deals with the concepts and ways of measuring subjective poverty. This note summarises the experience of both National Statistical Offices and international organisations in measuring subjective poverty and identifies problems and challenges. It also proposes further work to increase the use of subjective poverty measures and to create the conditions for international comparisons in this area.*

*The Bureau is invited to discuss the issues, challenges, conclusions and recommendations identified in this paper, and consider the need for follow-up work at the international level.*

**I. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

1. This in-depth review was mandated by the Bureau of the Conference of European Statisticians and deals with the concepts and ways of measuring subjective poverty. This note summarises the experience of both National Statistical Offices and international organisations in measuring subjective poverty and identifies problems and challenges. It also proposes further work to increase the use of subjective poverty measures and to create the conditions for international comparisons in this area.

2. At the international level, little was known about the data and indicators which national statistical offices collect and compile on subjective poverty. In order to shed light on this issue and to prepare an in-depth review, Statistics Poland has developed a short questionnaire addressed to National Statistical Offices. Feedback to the questionnaire was received from 53 countries.

3. Both the literature review and research practice indicate different ways of understanding and defining the term subjective poverty. This indicates a need to clarify terminology and develop a system of concepts related to the measurement of subjective poverty.

4. At present, both at national and international level, objective indicators play a dominant role in monitoring the phenomenon of poverty, and statistical offices give priority to the production of these data. The measurement of subjective poverty is generally very limited or not considered at all.

5. In the framework of “official statistics”, direct self-identification as poor is very rarely used. In most countries, household surveys include questions on subjective assessments of living standards, which can provide a basis for calculating indirect measures of subjective poverty. However, in practice these data are not fully exploited for the analysis of subjective poverty.

6. The omission of the subjective approach, as complementary to the objective measurement, significantly weakens the diagnosis of poverty. In this context it seems important to disseminate knowledge on the usefulness and interpretation of subjective data on poverty.

7. Taking into consideration the conclusions of the review of methods used to measure subjective poverty and the opinion of National Statistical Offices on the usefulness of work in this area at international level, it is proposed to develop a guide on methods for measuring subjective poverty and to agree on a short list of harmonised subjective poverty indicators for international comparisons. To ensure the implementation of these tasks it is proposed to establish under the umbrella of the Conference of European Statisticians a Task Force on Subjective Poverty Measurement.

## **II. INTRODUCTION**

8. The Bureau of the Conference of European Statisticians (CES) regularly reviews selected statistical areas in depth. The aim of the reviews is to improve coordination of statistical activities in the UNECE region, identify gaps or duplication of work, and address emerging issues. The review focuses on strategic issues and highlights concerns of National Statistical Offices of both a conceptual and a coordinating nature. This paper provides the basis for the review by summarising the international statistical activities in the selected area, identifying issues and problems, and making recommendations on possible follow-up actions.

9. The Bureau of the Conference of European Statisticians selected subjective poverty for an in-depth review for its October 2021 meeting. Statistics Poland agreed to prepare the paper providing the main basis for the review.

10. This initiative follows the methodological work under the Conference that has led to the publication of the Guide on poverty measurement in 2017 and the Guide on disaggregated poverty measures in 2020.

## **III. SCOPE OF THE STATISTICAL AREA COVERED<sup>1</sup>**

11. In general, the definitions found in the literature identify poverty as the fact of not having certain needs met at the desired level. Statistical measurement, however, requires

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<sup>1</sup> The presented description of the concepts and methods used to measure poverty is based on both literature and research practice. It is a compilation of work and views of many authors, hence there are no references to specific items in the literature. At the same time, the document contains a list of references used in its preparation.

clarification as to what kind of needs should be taken into account and what level of unsatisfied needs should be treated as the poverty threshold.

12. The choice of a particular definition of poverty and of the measurement method used determines the results of the assessment. Depending on the approach applied, different population groups may be considered to be at highest risk of poverty. This has an implication for the design of programmes, formulated by social policy, aimed at reducing this phenomenon.

13. The decision on how to measure poverty involves, among other things, the choice to consider poverty in an objective or in a subjective way. Generally speaking, in the case of the objective approach – defining what we call poverty, setting poverty thresholds, is done by experts, regardless of the surveyed individuals (households, persons) opinion. The subjective approach, on the other hand, takes into account the opinions of respondents.

14. The main characteristic of the subjective approach to poverty measurement is that the threshold between poor and non-poor is determined on the basis of people's perception of their own well-being.

15. The use of the so-called subjective approach does not eliminate the necessity for the researcher to make certain arbitrary decisions. These decisions are made at different stages of the research and are of different nature. This makes it difficult to clearly divide the applied methods and obtained indicators into subjective and objective measures.

16. Among the methods of measuring subjective poverty described in the literature and used in research practice the following could be distinguished:

(a) the direct, strictly subjective measurement of poverty, in which people assess themselves as poor or not without reference to the definition of poverty formulated by others;

(b) indirect subjective poverty measurement, where questions asked to respondents do not directly refer to feelings of poverty, but concern subjective assessments of various aspects of living standards (e.g. ability to “make ends meet”, ability to satisfy various needs). In this approach, the respondent's subjective assessment of his or her own situation determines whether or not he or she is classified as experiencing poverty, although this is done with reference to the poverty criteria adopted by the researcher. For example, a household/person will be considered subjectively poor if, in a multi-level attitude question, they declare that they ‘can make ends meet with great difficulty or with difficulty’;

(c) ‘objectivised’ measurement of subjective poverty, which includes an approach based on so-called subjective poverty lines (thresholds) assessed with the use of statistical methods. In this approach, only the respondents' opinions about their own situation are subjective in nature, and these opinions constitute the starting point for the determination of poverty lines. Poverty thresholds for populations with certain socio-demographic characteristics are estimated by statistical analysis (using more or less advanced statistical methods, including econometric models) of the declared subjective assessments<sup>2</sup>. Poverty

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<sup>2</sup> The most popular methods of estimating such thresholds include: The Leyden Poverty Line (LPL) method, the Subjective Poverty Line (SPL) method, the Center for Social Policy Poverty Line (CSP) method and the method based on a consumption adequacy question (CAQ).

lines estimated in this way are called quasi-subjective.

17. A different category of surveys in the area of poverty is public opinion surveys on the perception of poverty as a social phenomenon. This type of survey allows, for example, to answer the question of how widespread poverty is perceived by people in a given country, what are the causes of poverty according to the public, what should be the role of the state in the fight against poverty, what forms of support the poor need, etc.<sup>3</sup>

18. According to experts in poverty survey, subjective poverty measurement is not an alternative to objective poverty measurement, but should be considered as complementary. The subjective approach shows the problem of poverty from a completely different perspective than the objective one.

19. Applying a subjective approach allows to better understand what poverty means to people, as well as to verify whether objective evaluations of poverty are consistent with the social perception of this phenomenon. Subjective measures also provide information on 'public moods', which can influence people's behaviour in both the economic, social and political spheres. Statistical analyses related to the use of subjective and quasi-subjective measures may also be used to verify and even construct measures of an objective nature (e.g. the consensus method for constructing deprivation indices, verification of equivalence scales used).

#### **IV. OVERVIEW OF INTERNATIONAL STATISTICAL ACTIVITIES IN THE AREA**

20. A review of poverty surveys and analyses conducted over the past few years by international organisations and institutions such as Eurostat, the World Bank, the OECD and the UNDP shows that subjective poverty has not been in the centre of attention of these institutions. The objective approach was clearly dominant at that time. This applies to the measurement of both absolute and relative poverty, and increasingly to multidimensional poverty. Such indicators are used to monitor poverty reduction goals set out in strategic documents such as the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, the EU-2020 Strategy, the European Pillar of Social Rights.

21. However, some positive practices of the Eurostat and in particular OECD activities in measuring some aspects of subjective poverty should be noted.

##### **A. Eurostat**

22. Eurostat holds and releases microdata sets from EU-SILC<sup>4</sup> survey, which also include variables (subjective assessments of living standards, questions about making ends meet) that constitute a potential data source for measuring some aspects of subjective poverty also at international level (e.g. estimating quasi-subjective poverty lines or calculating indirect measures of subjective poverty).

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<sup>3</sup> An example of this type of survey can be the Special EUROBAROMETER 355 "POVERTY AND SOCIAL EXCLUSION". This survey was requested by the Directorate-General for Employment, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities (DG EMPL) and coordinated by the Directorate General for Communication.

<sup>4</sup> EU-SILC - the European Union Statistics on Income and Living Conditions survey

23. On the basis of Eurostat's datasets, analytical work in the area of subjective poverty has been carried out by various research centres<sup>5</sup>.

24. In addition, Eurostat, on the basis of a harmonised question included in EU-SILC, calculates and publishes on its website the indicator 'difficulties with making ends meet' as an indirect measure of subjective poverty. This makes it possible to compare at EU-SILC country level indicators of the extent of objective poverty with people's feelings of subjective economic stress.

## **B. OECD<sup>6</sup>**

### **1. Subjective poverty**

25. The OECD has been collecting evidence on subjective poverty through Compare your Income (CYI), a web-based interactive tool that allows users to explore income statistics and compare how well or badly off they are, and test whether their perceptions are in line with the actual situation in their country. The web-tool was launched in 2015 and so far collected more than 2 million entries. Over the course of years, the web-tool attracted a varied audience, thanks to the fact that it covers all OECD countries (except Colombia, for which internationally comparable income data are currently missing), is available in 9 languages and has been widely promoted.

26. The OECD's work on subjective poverty is based on a direct question on income adequacy where CYI users are asked to indicate the amount of income that a household like theirs would need to avoid poverty ("In your country, you would consider a household like yours poor if its income was below..."). Replies can be provided in either monthly or annual terms.

27. Evidence on subjective poverty drawn on CYI users' replies will be published in a forthcoming OECD working paper.

### **2. Other related activities**

28. The OECD is working to develop a framework that integrates *subjective and ethical* dimensions to provide a better understanding of: (i) how *non-material* dimensions of well-being contribute to the empowerment of individuals and communities; and (ii) how public policy can help build essential social and psychological resources such as dignity, respect, empathy, cooperation, sense of belonging and community ties that provide the basis for building and sustaining better socio-economic outcomes. The project draws on insights from different disciplines and on innovative research methods (including participatory research involving vulnerable individuals as producers of knowledge).

29. The OECD is looking into ways to better reach out to the poor while collecting data on the matter, including through participatory research, as was already the case with the

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<sup>5</sup> see: Želinský, Tomáš; Mysíková, Martina; Garner, Thesia I. (2021): Trends in subjective income poverty rates in the European Union, GLO Discussion Paper, No. 892, Global Labor Organization (GLO), Essen, Subjective poverty in Europe: the role of household socioeconomic characteristics and social capital\*.

<sup>6</sup> On the basis of a contribution prepared by OECD expert Ms Carlotta Balestra

[Conference on the Hidden Dimensions of Poverty](#) jointly organised with ATD Fourth World in May 2019.

## V. COUNTRY PRACTICES

30. The information presented below is a synthetic summary of the responses provided by National Statistical Offices (or other institutions responsible for official statistics on poverty in the country) to a short questionnaire on the data sources and methods currently used to measure subjective poverty. In answering the questions, it was necessary to take into account the surveys and analyses carried out by ‘official statistics’ (also in cooperation with research centres or international organisations) every year, as well as surveys carried out periodically – starting from 2015. The questionnaire also took into account the views of national experts on the usefulness of undertaking further work on measuring subjective poverty at international level.

31. Responses were received from 53 countries - 44 UNECE member countries and 9 countries outside the region<sup>7</sup>.

32. The conclusions of the analysis of the responses received from each country are grouped according to the different possible methods of measuring subjective poverty (covering both the stage of collecting subjective data on living standards and the way the data collected are used to measure poverty).

### A. Poverty defined in a fully subjective way (direct self-identification as poor, feeling of poverty)

33. The questionnaire indicates the low popularity of using a strictly subjective (direct) method of measuring poverty in official statistics. Out of the 53 countries considered, only 10 countries included questions allowing for the assessment of the size of the population (individuals or households) defining (identifying) themselves as poor or feeling at risk of poverty (Colombia, Costa Rica, Israel, Kyrgyzstan, Malta, Poland, Ukraine, Uzbekistan, Vietnam, Turkey – where this type of data was collected but not published). These questions were worded differently. The frequency of information collection also varied.

34. The 'social position scales' approach can also be considered a direct measurement of subjective poverty. People who locate themselves at the lowest levels of the social hierarchy are considered poor. This approach was used in a survey carried out by Statistics Canada.

### B. Perceived financial difficulties

35. The vast majority of countries participating in the review include questions (in varying numbers) on subjective qualitative assessments of current income or financial situation in their surveys. These can form the basis for the calculation of various indirect indicators of subjective poverty, including an indicator of subjective economic stress. The most commonly used internationally harmonised question in this area is the “making ends meet” question. It is a core variable in the EU-SILC survey. This question is also included in other surveys carried out by countries participating in the review.

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<sup>7</sup> These countries are: Brazil, Colombia, Costa Rica, Dominican Republic, Japan, Mexico, Mongolia, New Zealand, Vietnam.

36. In addition, both in the EU-SILC countries and in many other countries, household surveys also include variables relating to respondents' subjective assessments of their inability to satisfy (due to financial difficulties) various types of material and non-material needs. These variables are used, among other things, to build aggregate deprivation indicators (deprivation scores). The deprivation indicators also take into account partial variables of an objective nature and, for this reason among others, these scores are not classified as subjective measures.

### **C. Subjective poverty line approach – perceived poverty line**

37. No country asked directly about the subjective poverty line in their household surveys, while 2 (Ukraine and Kyrgyzstan) out of 53 National Statistical Offices included in their surveys a question about the amount of money which, under the conditions of a particular household, would allow it to avoid poverty.

38. On the other hand, the question on 'lowest monthly income to make ends meet'<sup>8</sup> was quite commonly used. This question was used not only in the countries conducting the EU-SILC survey, where it was a core variable, but also in surveys conducted in other countries. Theoretically, this variable could be treated as a 'individual subjective poverty lines', as well as a starting point for the calculation of so-called 'objectivised poverty lines'. In the revised EU-SILC, from 2021, this variable has been removed from the list of mandatory variables, which will probably significantly reduce the number of countries using this question.

### **D. Subjective poverty lines assessed with the use of statistical methods (so-called objectivised, quasi-subjective poverty lines)**

39. Only 3 countries declared using the information collected on subjective well-being to calculate such poverty lines in recent years.

40. The Italian National Institute of Statistics (ISTAT) has applied the so-called SPL method, based on a question about the minimum income needed to make ends meet. Estimates were made, annually. The SPL method was also used by Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE) (periodically). The possibility of using LPL (Leyden Poverty Line) and CSP (The Centre for Social Policy Poverty Line) methods was also tested in Brazil. On the other hand, Statistics Poland developed its own method (inspired by the LPL method) for estimating the so-called objectivised poverty line, based on the 'Deleeck question' ('how a household with its actual income can make ends meet') included in the EU-SILC survey. This experimental method has, inter alia, been presented at expert meetings on poverty measurement organised regularly by the UNECE.

### **E. Perception of poverty as a social phenomenon**

41. Among the 53 countries covered by the questionnaire only one statistical office (Statistics Poland) included in its cyclical social cohesion survey, carried out every few years, a module of questions concerning the opinion of respondents on different aspects of poverty. The questions concerned, inter alia, opinions on: the extent of poverty in Poland,

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<sup>8</sup> "In your opinion, what is the very lowest net monthly income that your household would have to have in order to make ends meet, that is to pay its usual necessary expenses?"

the role of the state in reducing poverty as well as the most important forms of support addressed to poor people.

#### **F. Other approaches**

42. Subjective opinions of respondents are used, among others, for the construction and verification of so-called objective poverty measures. During the period under review (surveys from 2015), such approaches were applied in Belarus and Canada.

43. In Belarus, the so-called consensual (based on the perception of social needs) approach to the construction of the deprivation indicator was applied<sup>9</sup>.

44. Statistics Canada has implemented crowdsourcing consultation on measuring poverty. The results of the consultation were used to verify/evaluate the official poverty line (Market Basket Measure)<sup>10</sup>.

#### **VI. SUMMARY**

45. A review of national practices shows that few countries use direct measurement of subjective poverty through self-assessment questions. In contrast, most countries include questions on subjective assessments of perceived living standards in household surveys. This includes an assessment of the income situation, the financial problems encountered, as well as the ability to satisfy various types of material and non-material needs. Conceptually, these questions can be used to calculate indirect measures of subjective poverty and to estimate subjective poverty thresholds.

46. While questions on the inability to meet various needs are commonly used to calculate deprivation indicators, other questions, e.g. questions on the perception of income situation (including the internationally harmonised question on making ends meet) are rather underused for analyses of subjective poverty.

47. In general, it can be said that measurement and analysis of subjective poverty tend to be minimised or omitted for most national statistical offices. A small group of countries produces, analyses and publishes data in this area on a regular basis. Among the 53 countries participating in the review of national practices, 6 countries declared that they do not collect any information in their surveys and do not conduct any work on subjective poverty.

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<sup>9</sup> Based on the question: “In your opinion, is it possible to consider as a sign of poverty in the modern Belarusian society, the situation when, due to lack of money, a household is unable to...”. (The respondent is offered a broad list of attributes covering various aspects of the standard and quality of life of the population. The respondent should express his/her opinion about each attribute).

<sup>10</sup> The questionnaire provided estimates for the costs of certain items (e.g., food, clothing, shelter and transportation) and asked if respondents thought the value was too high, too low or about right. If the respondent answered too high/low, they were prompted to enter what they thought was a reasonable amount. There were additional questions related to the respondent's opinion on the importance and inclusion of certain items for a modest, basic standard of living.



## **A. Opinions on the usefulness of undertaking further work on measuring subjective poverty at international level**

### **(i) Preparation of a guide**

48. According to the questionnaire, 38 National Statistical Offices saw the need to prepare a guide providing an overview of the methods used to measure subjective poverty. Five NSOs expressed the opposite view and 10 did not express an opinion.

### **(ii) Development of a list of indicators for international comparisons**

49. 35 countries were in favour of working on a short list of subjective poverty indicators for international comparisons, while 8 countries did not see a need to undertake such work and 10 countries did not present their opinion.

50. In their comments on undertaking work on a harmonised approach for measuring subjective poverty at the international level, countries emphasized the need for strong involvement of international institutions in this process.

## **VII. ISSUES AND CHALLENGES**

### **A. Different ways of defining and understanding subjective poverty**

51. A review of the literature and measurement practice indicates that there are different understandings of the term “subjective poverty”. This is due both to the complexity of the phenomenon of poverty in general and to the fact that subjective poverty is part of a larger field of analysis on the subjective perception of well-being.

52. The lack of an unambiguous interpretation of the term “subjective poverty” is also complicated by the fact that it is used in the context of the application of various measurement methods that are characterised by varying levels of subjectivity. In some cases, subjective variables are only the starting point for the construction of "objectivised measures" (e.g. deprivation index).

53. This indicates a need to clarify terminology and develop a system of concepts related to the measurement of subjective poverty. It would be useful in this context to explain the interrelationships and differences between the concept of subjective poverty and the concepts of poverty, objective poverty, subjective well-being, subjective standard of living and subjective economic well-being.

### **B. Low use of subjective data for poverty monitoring**

54. Data on poverty should provide a basis for the design and evaluation of social policies. Currently, both at national and international level, the so-called objective poverty indicators play a dominant role in this respect. National Statistical Offices treat the production of such data as a priority task. The measurement of subjective poverty is generally limited to a minimum or omitted.

55. The omission of the subjective approach, as complementary to the objective measurement, significantly weakens the diagnosis of poverty. In this context it seems

important to disseminate knowledge on the usefulness and interpretation of subjective data on poverty, both among potential users of this type of information (social policymakers) and among statistical services. It has been noted, that in many cases the resources of data collected in surveys that can provide a basis for analysing certain aspects of subjective poverty are not fully used.

### **C. Lack of commonly agreed measures of subjective poverty for international comparisons**

56. A common list of subjective poverty indicators has not yet been agreed at international level. Catching up on this appears to be a necessity in the context of the need to obtain a more comprehensive picture of the global evolution of subjective well-being. The development of such a list requires close cooperation between the international organizations and National Statistical Offices responsible for data production.

57. Given the various constraints on the implementation of surveys as a source of subjective data, the number of indicators proposed should be limited to the necessary minimum.

58. It is also necessary to ensure maximum harmonisation of the input data.

59. When working in this area, it is important to take into consideration the different economic, social, political and cultural conditions across countries. This is important at every stage of the research process - from the wording of the questions included in the survey to the interpretation of the results.

## **VIII. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE WORK**

60. Taking into consideration the conclusions of the review of the methods used to measure subjective poverty and the opinion of National Statistical Offices on the usefulness of working at international level in this area, it is proposed to:

(a) Prepare a follow-up paper and discussing at the next meeting of the UNECE Group of Experts on Measuring Poverty and Inequality (December 2021) the results of the in-depth review of subjective poverty measurement methods;

(b) Develop a guide on the measurement of subjective poverty;

Guidance for conducting international comparisons using subjective poverty measures should be an integral part of this guide.

Therefore, a “short list of subjective poverty indicators” should be developed, together with a set of questions used to calculate these indicators and algorithms for their calculation. It is also advisable to provide an interpretation of each measure (with its advantages and disadvantages).

(c) Establish under the umbrella of the Conference of European Statisticians a Task Force on Subjective Poverty Measurement.

The group's primary task would be to prepare the guide, including the development of subjective poverty indicators for international comparisons. The group should include representatives of National Statistical Offices, international institutions and organisations, but also academics.

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