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Understanding Poverty: Insights Emerging from Time Use of the Poor

*Indira Hirway**

Introduction

It is now widely recognized that to view poverty only as income poverty is far from adequate, because low income/consumption is only one dimension of the multiple dimensions of poverty. The other dimensions of poverty include low human capabilities (human poverty), vulnerability, exclusion and marginalization, chronic nature of poverty and so on, on which there is extensive literature. It is usually argued that a major reason why the poor are poor is that they possess no or low capital, where capital consists of: (1) physical capital; (2) financial capital; (3) human capital; and (4) social capital. Because of their low capital base the poor are restricted in terms of their access to better opportunities in the economy. That is, their access to productive employment and income declines considerably, as they do not have an adequate base of capital.

One missing asset or capital here however is time. The poor have as much time as the non-poor. Since time is a major asset of the poor, who have no/low assets otherwise, it is important to understand how they spend their time. Information on how the poor use their time, or rather how they are forced to use their time to fight their multiple deprivations, can provide useful insights into their poverty. Their time use can reveal their constraints and problems on the one hand and can throw light on the potential areas of interventions for poverty reduction on the other hand. Though some attention has been paid to time poverty in some recent literature (Charmes, 2006; Kes and Swaminathan, 2006; Blakden and Woden, 2006), this has been limited to time stress and time burden, particularly of women. There is a need to go beyond time stress to understand the nature of poverty as reflected in the time use of the poor.

Time-use data provide comprehensive information on how people allocate their time between different activities such as productive work in the labor market, subsistence work (for example, production for self consumption), unpaid domestic and community work, personal care, rest, relaxation, reading, writing, education and so on. It is possible that the allocation of time by the poor creates constraints for them for getting out of poverty. It will therefore be useful to study their time use systematically.

This chapter intends to do this. It discusses the conceptual issues related to time use and poverty and analyzes the Indian time use data to understand the time use of the poor in India. The chapter ends with drawing policy implications of the time use for poverty reduction.

Understanding poverty through time use

The time dimension of poverty seems to have two major components: (1) the unfavorable allocation of time of the poor; and (2) time stress of the poor. The former seems to constrain the participation of the poor in productive work and leaves less time for capacity building and for social networking (namely, social capital), while the latter tends to result in the depletion of human capital, particularly for women, and in reduction in their well-being. The time use of the poor thus tends to reinforce poverty of the poor.

Unfavorable allocation of time of the poor

Time is a major asset for the poor and the poor are likely to use it to fight their multiple deprivations and vulnerability. The time use of the poor is likely to be determined by their constraints and problems on the one hand and their priorities and preferences on the other hand. The different constraints of the poor are likely to reduce their freedom or choices available concerning their time use and this, in turn, is likely to create distortions and further constraints to limit their opportunities in life.

Struggle to acquire basic necessities in life and livelihood

The first major constraint of the ultra-poor households is that they are forced to spend long hours on unpaid subsistence activities like collection of free goods, mostly from common lands and forests, to acquire basic needs of life and to manage their livelihoods.

The first claim on the time of the poor is of the basic necessities in life. As observed in many developing countries, the poor spend a lot of