In this chapter I develop an analytical framework that defends an ameliorative approach to the conception and measurement of poverty. Whereas much of the debate in poverty measurement has focused on either getting the conception ‘right’ or getting the measure to more precisely match the conception, I argue that poverty is essentially contestable. There is no conception or measure of poverty that is decisively correct to the exclusion of other possible accounts. Any attempt to articulate a conception or measure of poverty should reflect on both the values that ought to influence poverty measurement and the purposes that are served by poverty measurement. This framework is explicitly normative, and rejects purportedly value-neutral approaches. Such a framework does not eschew objectivity. In fact, serious reflection on the values that should inform poverty measurement, through justifiable processes of public reason, may enhance the objectivity of a global poverty measure.

3.1 Is poverty analysis question begging?

Before developing a methodological framework, we must examine whether the conceptual analysis of poverty is an inherently flawed, question-begging exercise. In the course of this book, I will assess five different conceptions of poverty, and their corresponding measures. In some cases, I will argue that a particular conception or measure of poverty fails to include or capture (in an appropriate way) a certain set of poor people. In other cases, I will argue that the conception or measure does not include certain dimensions of human deprivation that are at least partially constitutive of poverty.

One might object that this begs the question – how can we know that a person who is poor is not included in a certain conception or measure.
of poverty if we do not already know what poverty is and how it should
be measured? Isn't it impossible to be agnostic about which poverty
conception and measure should be adopted while also criticizing exist-
ing conceptions and measures of poverty? For any poverty conception
(C) or measure (M), if I argue that C or M fail because they incorrectly
describe the case of person P, mustn't I be presupposing some other
C* or M* that justify the alternative categorization of P? To avoid this
charge, we must appeal to the vague sense in which poverty can be ini-
tially stated, the diversity of existing conceptions of poverty, the diver-
sity of empirical evidence about poverty, and the existence of diverse
paradigmatic cases.

Poverty can be stated at a sufficiently vague level so that no strong
assumptions are made regarding the content or extension of the con-
cept. Vaguely stated, poverty is a deprivation or lack of X. We can be cer-
tain that X is not some things, such as spiritual fulfillment or romantic
love, without being committed to the view that any particular dimen-
sions are constitutive of X.

If we attempt to give more specificity to the definition of poverty, a
variety of conceptions of poverty already exist to which we can appeal:
poverty as consumption/income deprivation, poverty as a lack of some
basic needs, poverty as a lack of capabilities, poverty as a lack of social
inclusion, poverty as a lack of rights, and so on. But we need not assume
the truth of any particular conception of poverty to demonstrate flaws
in some other conception.

Similarly, we can appeal to a large number of paradigmatic cases
of poor individuals: a malnourished child in a developing country; a
homeless, unemployed person in a developed country vulnerable to
violence and poor health; a person who is subjected to degrading and
inhumane work in order to attempt to meet basic needs – such as carry-
ing buckets of human feces on their heads or picking through trash to
find the resources to survive. Each of these is a clear paradigmatic case
of poverty.

Finally, a vast amount of empirical information has been collected on
poverty. This empirical information provides a number of accounts of
what it is like to be poor, what constitutes poverty, what the causes of
poverty are, and what the potential solutions to poverty might be.

Given the diversity of conceptions of poverty, the diversity of para-
digmatic cases of poverty, the diversity of empirical information regard-
ing poverty, and the ability to provide an initial vague statement of the
concept, there are sufficient intellectual resources available for begin-
ing to assess existing conceptions and measures of poverty without