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International Comparisons in Fighting Poverty: The Poverty Stoplight Program in South Africa, the UK, and the US

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ABSTRACT

This study compares international experiences in how the poor are fighting poverty. The study data are derived from clients participating in the Poverty Stoplight program where clients create the set of indicators defining multidimensional poverty. Clients then create a plan to change a set of indicators in order to raise themselves out of poverty. By comparing efforts across three countries, the study analyzes the diversity of contexts in light of the United Nations sustainable development goal to “end poverty in all its forms everywhere” that must necessarily account for this diversity.

KEYWORDS

Poverty; poverty alleviation; narrative; Africa; Western Europe

Introduction

Collective action to limit poverty and economic insecurity is a chapter in the development of industrial society. This chapter includes the institutionalization of social welfare programs in Europe and North America, the creation of institutional support for retirement from the labor market, and the development of public health services (Beveridge, 1942; Esping-Andersen, 1990; Marmot, 2015). These activities counter-balance the tendency for industrial society to concentrate income and wealth within the property-owning classes (Kuznets, 1955; Picketty & Saez, 2014). One result of this activity is the distribution of goods and services through non-market mechanisms, a result that was shaped by politics, institutional development, and the struggle of the lower classes for their material betterment.

We contend that collective action to fight poverty and economic insecurity is no less significant in the contemporary world due to the emerging post-industrial transition. Global technological change is a causal element within this transition, and is disrupting nations and communities reliant on routine, low-skill industries, including many manufacturing industries, service industries, and most of agriculture. Cheap microprocessors and robotics continue to improve in their capacity to replace routine labor in manufacturing and

service industries (Brynjolfsson & McAfee, 2014; Collins, 2013; Ford, 2015; Summers, 2013). New technologies are disrupting industrial agriculture with cheaper and highly efficient methods, e.g., protein fermentation is now poised to replace animal agriculture (Barrett, 2021; Monbiot, 2020). Protein fermentation is estimated to be “100 times more land efficient, 10–25 times more feedstock efficient, 20 times more time efficient and 10 times more water efficient” relative to industrial agriculture (Tubb & Seba, 2019, p. 6). While this technology appears to be environmentally sustainable, its implications for small-scale agricultural producers, including those in Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia where approximately half of the economically active population is engaged in small-scale agriculture, is unknown (India Brand Equity Foundation [IBEF], 2021; Goedde et al., 2019). It is probable that the future welfare of small producers in these areas will depend upon public policy safeguards to their welfare, given the likelihood of future disruptions to the organization of agriculture (Barrett, 2021).

As of 2018, the largest global concentrations of extreme poverty were in Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia (PovcalNet, 2021), the same areas with high densities of small-scale agricultural producers. It is doubtful that significant reduction in extreme poverty that began in the 1980s can continue for these regions, at least not on the basis of economic growth alone (Lakner & Milanovic, 2013). The global reduction in extreme poverty between the years 1987 and 2013 was driven by industrial economic growth, especially in China, India, and Indonesia (Page & Pande, 2018, p. 175; see also Pande et al., 2019). However, over the past two decades, economic growth has been less effective in reducing the numbers of extremely poor, and it is apparent that doing so will require some combination of government policy and an environment where “poor citizens remain the ultimate principal” (Page & Pande, 2018, p. 195). The likelihood that states are up to this is dimmed by the rise of nationalist and populist political regimes that display no inclination to deliver policies that reduce extreme poverty. New types of political leadership are needed to organize and lead the effort to reduce extreme poverty.

Yet another dimension of global poverty is that economic growth has failed to significantly reduce absolute poverty in the wealthiest country, the United States. Since the 1960s when the US government established an official poverty standard, absolute poverty has ranged within a narrow band between 10% and 15% of population (Rank et al., 2014). These levels can be expected to continue and even increase with the continuing adoption of post-industrial technologies that replace routine, low-skilled labor in manufacturing and service industries. The adoption of these technologies in service industries was accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic, and it is anticipated that a significant proportion of the eliminated jobs will not return post-pandemic (Semuels, 2020; Susskind, 2020).

Post-industrial technological development does not necessarily lead to economic displacement and the ratcheting up of inequality, and could be deployed in ways that reduce inequality. Dyson (1999) articulates a well-designed plan for configuring solar power, agricultural genomics, and the Internet into platforms to bring efficient, sustainable production to all communities on the planet. However, the political will to organize and lead this type of effort is lacking voice from within the public sector. In the absence of an effective, public-minded focus, the current trajectory is to deploy these technologies to cheapen costs under the constraint of private profit, even though the possibility for broad improvements in human welfare is possible and practical. The material self-interest to create publicly dedicated, sustainable post-industrial wealth resides in all social classes, and especially within those classes who would benefit the most: the millions living in poverty. Successful methods that organize and focus the activity of the poor to eliminate their own poverty could provide additional energy and political rationale to the development trajectory described by Dyson (1999).

In this paper, we consider one tool for organizing and assessing the self-consciousness of the global poor: the Poverty Stoplight programs in the UK, South Africa, and the U.S. By comparing and contrasting international voices of the poor, the analysis endeavors to add new insights to poverty knowledge. Much of the existing knowledge is derived from academic and public policy sources, and while this can be valuable, we believe that reports from the poor themselves may expand poverty knowledge in useful ways, in particular when endeavoring to better their circumstances. This proposition is consistent with the lessons learned from the failures and successes of US anti-poverty policies, including the “war on poverty” (US House Republicans, 2012; O’Connor, 2002; US White House, 2014). Policies designed to mitigate poverty in the US were implemented primarily through government programs with little, if any, consultation from the poor.

This study endeavors to compare and contrast international experiences in fighting poverty by analyzing how the poor themselves are endeavoring to do so. Three elements frame this effort. First, the study data are derived from clients participating in the Poverty Stoplight (Burt, 2019; Hammler, 2020), a client-centered, client-directed program. Poverty Stoplight asks clients to identify and evaluate a set of empirical indicators that define and structure their own impoverishment. These indicators constitute diverse sets of domains related to income and employment, health, and environment, housing, education, community engagement, and self-motivation. Second, the sum of the indicators constitute a multidimensional theory of poverty. Third, individuals identify a set of indicators to transition in order to begin to raise themselves out of poverty, with the assistance of a trained consultant. In summary, anti-poverty efforts are at the discretion and volition of the individual client where

past experiences can serve as inputs to future efforts. By comparing this activity across US, the UK, and South Africa, the study analyzes how the poor are endeavoring to change the conditions that constitute their poverty burden.

Current knowledge about client-directed paths out of poverty

There are a variety of studies assessing client-directed paths from poverty, and many use self-assessment in a manner similar to Poverty Stoplight. In the literature on poverty in the developing world, the term self-help group (SHG) has become increasingly popular as a method of empowerment that considers the voice of the poor in shaping economic and social interventions (Sinha et al., 2012; Yntiso, 2015). Often these programs are connected to resources from local governments, nonprofit organizations, and non-state actors such as companies or banks.

Current themes regarding client-directed pathways out of poverty include studies of microfinance, employment training, entrepreneurship, women's empowerment, and increasing social capital. Additionally, studies often incorporate oral or written interviews, surveys, and progress reports that ask clients about their situations and their goals (Copestake et al., 2005; Flynn, 2013). In Ethiopia, the concept of SHGs was first introduced from India where it is widely practiced, and had proven to be successful in reducing poverty, in particular among all-women SHGs (Sinha et al., 2012; Yntiso, 2015).

In the "Self Help Group-Bank Linkage Programme" in India, SHGs encouraged the pooling of money to use as loans, including agricultural credit. The effects from this activity were analyzed by evaluating indicators of household savings, infrastructure development, household income, and women's empowerment across 900 SHGs encompassing 4,791 households. The study authors found that women who were a part of the SHGs improved significantly "on both social and economic fronts," and that overall, there was a 26% reduction in poverty among study participants (Sinha et al., 2012).

SHG results from Peru were found to be biased in favor of more advantaged clients who were more likely to escape from poverty, whereas less advantaged clients were not (Copestake et al., 2005). Using qualitative in-depth interviews, the study found that some of the participants fared worse after participating in the program, and the winners tended to be those with secondary or higher education and owners of larger businesses. Second, the Peru study compared client-planned pathways to those specified by the organization and concluded that both should be used in a complimentary manner. Similar to the Group-Bank Linkage Programme of India, the study found that the participants saw an overall reduction in poverty.

These aforementioned programs are both similar and different from the Poverty Stoplight program. One unique aspect of the Poverty Stoplight is the usage of broad domains of multidimensional indicators and the sorting out of stages of progress within these indicators. For example, some studies of microfinance ask clients to identify their status in economic and financial realms but not socially or in terms of housing or infrastructure. However, most if not all microfinance programs include some form of written or oral self-assessment that is administered to the client. Many of these programs use self-assessment in terms of asking clients to fill out forms or oral interviews to find out the areas in their life where they feel the need to improve. The concept that clients are “actors,” or subjects of poverty elimination, versus objects of poverty elimination, is explicit in these studies (Flynn, 2013).

In the United States, fighting poverty is a long-standing component of community development programming, and the efficacy of these efforts have been found to vary significantly from place to place (Allen & Weber, 2007; Bradshaw, 2007). In regions such as the Mississippi Delta, community development methods related to “civic participation” (Kretzmann & McKnight, 1993) are less effective due to barriers embedded in race and class hierarchies (Harvey, 2013; Richardson & London, 2007). Anti-poverty programs that utilize civic engagement are relatively more successful in communities with lower levels of economic inequality, and where economic inequality is not confounded by race and ethnic inequality (Duncan, 1999). In these highly unequal places social structures tend to be unfavorable to anti-poverty efforts, hence structural change may be a necessary component for achieving success there.

Comparisons regarding poverty in the U.S., the U.K., and South Africa

We first compare the US to the UK, and then both of these to South Africa. This approach is predicated on the relative size of the respective countries’ Gini Index of Income Inequality that estimates deviation from a perfectly equal income distribution (Gini, 1921). A national Gini index close to zero represents near perfect family income equality, whereas a Gini equal to 100 would indicate perfect inequality where one household receives all national income. In 2016, the UK Gini was 35, the US Gini was 41 and the South Africa Gini equal to 63 (World Bank, 2020). Not only is the South African Gini higher than the US/UK Gini, but it is also the highest Gini index in the world. This relation is corroborated by a study of income and wealth inequality (Francis & Webster, 2019, p. 788) that finds South Africa “is one of the most unequal countries in the world, if not the most unequal.” It is also the case that the US Gini is high relative to other comparable countries, including all European countries, yet is 54% lower than the South African Gini.

A critical national policy related to poverty is access to health care, namely how available is it to those in poverty who may lack the ability to pay, or lack access to, quality health care. Both the US and South Africa share the distinction of having no publicly financed, universal health-care system. In this sense the US may be more like South Africa than the UK that enjoys a long-established National Health Service. The South African government provides AIDS medication free of charge, and the US Medicaid program provides health care for low-income residents, however Medicaid accessibility varies by state. The number of health uninsured in the US in 2019 was 26.1 million, representing 8.0% of total population (Keisler-Starkey & Bunch, 2020).

A recent study compared relative poverty in the US to UK over the period 1979 to 2017 using harmonized income data (Joyce & Ziliak, 2019). In this study the poverty cutoff is defined at 60% of median family income, and the authors reached several conclusions regarding US/UK commonalities and differences. First, that both countries have relatively similar poverty rates over this period, varying between 12% and 28%, and although the US rate is consistently higher than the UK rate, the two rates are converging over time. Second, that the composition of the poor in both countries is shifting toward households with at least one family member active in the labor force; and finally, that the aforementioned trend in working poverty remains relatively more prevalent in the US than in the UK. This suggests that one major reason for higher poverty in the US is the inability of workers to generate sufficient income through work. Since 1970, income and earnings have been concentrating in the top quintile, and even more so within the upper levels of the top quintile. Income concentration ratchets up relative poverty because it depresses relative income among those at the low end of the distribution (Piketty & Saez, 2014; Piketty, 2014).

Although South Africa's poverty rate varies over time, high poverty levels are a constant feature of its economy. In a study of South Africa from 2006 to 2015 using an absolute poverty definition, poverty in 2015 was estimated at between 40% and 56% of total population (Statistics South Africa, 2017, p. 14). While this represents a modest decline since 2006, the overall trend for this period is sustained high levels of poverty. Francis and Webster (2019, p. 788) further suggest that South Africa's high level of income and wealth inequality is connected to political inertia that effectively dampens public policy efforts to reduce poverty.

A final observation is that the three countries' respective Gini index ranking is related to national levels in differential poverty risk by race, i.e., countries with high poverty rates also tend to have high race/ethnic differences in the risk of poverty. In South Africa the ratio between absolute poverty among black South Africans versus white South Africans in 2015 was estimated at 18.8, indicating that a black South African is nearly 19 times more likely to be

poor than a white South African (Francis & Webster, 2019, p. 792). In the US in 2019, using an absolute poverty line, the ratio of nonHispanic Black to nonHispanic white poverty is 2.6 (Creamer, 2020). Finally, in the UK for the year 2007, using a relative poverty line, this ratio varies between 1.5 and 2.3 depending upon whether the comparison is Black Caribbean to white, or Black African to white (Her Majesty's Stationary Office, 2020). While these comparisons are not strictly comparable in terms of poverty measures and race/ethnic groups, they are consistent with the proposition that race and ethnic inequality operate as both cause and effect in relation to a nation's overall level of national income inequality (Wilson, 2011).

Materials and methods

There are various methods for defining poverty: 1) by a set of absolute or relative family income thresholds (Orshansky, 1969; Rank & Hirschl, 2015), 2) by limits to personal freedom resulting from lack of access to resources (Sen, 1999), or 3) by extremely low-income standards such as \$1.90 per person per day (World Bank, 2018, pp. 25–28). In South Africa and the United States, poverty is most often defined by absolute standards, whereas in the United Kingdom, relative standards are usually applied.

The data for this study come from three separate programs affiliated with the Poverty Stoplight, a methodology for fighting poverty that began in 2010 in Paraguay and has been implemented in 26 additional countries (Burt, 2019). The US program (“Move Forward Elmira”) is conducted in three census tracts within the City of Elmira, Chemung County, New York State. Elmira is on the Eastern edge of the nation's “rust belt” region that experienced long-term employment declines in manufacturing beginning in the early 1970s. The city-wide poverty rate in Elmira over the period 2014 – 2018 was 29%, and the rate for the three census tracts was 47%.

Move Forward Elmira is funded by a grant from the Appalachian Regional Commission and administered by Cornell Cooperative Extension of Chemung County. Study participants were identified in the three census tracts through organizational contacts among Chemung County Poverty Reduction Coalition participants, at free-of-charge community dinners, at a food and clothing pantry, and at a low-income housing project.

The UK program works with small and medium-sized enterprises as well as with large voluntary, community, and social enterprise sector organizations including charities, public sector bodies, foundations, and housing companies, and private corporate responsibility organizations across Britain. It is based in Gateshead, Northeast and adopted the brand name “SIGNAL” because the term “poverty” is stigmatizing and can create social barriers. SIGNAL

conducts programs in communities with high unemployment, where many receive benefits, and in areas scoring high on the UK official Index of Multiple Deprivation. It recruits participants through partner organizations.

The Greenlight Office in South Africa is located in Cape Town and serves over 80 organizations within all South African provinces. It considers itself a “learning partner” in its collaborations with organizations and conducts 90 minute “exploration sessions” before entering into partnership. In 2014, the program created a set of 50 indicators that are deployed nation-wide in order to be comparable across communities and over time.

British SIGNAL and South Africa Greenlight Office work in partnership with organizations that serve impoverished clients, whereas the US program works directly with clients in one community. British SIGNAL and the US program use community-created poverty indicators generated through community consensus, and clients score their status on each indicator during an interaction that can take anywhere from 35 to 60 minutes. If, for example, the indicator is “access to safe water,” the client would code it green if they have access, versus yellow or red if access is marginal or constitutes a deprivation. For all three programs, once baseline information is assembled, the client selects one or more indicators to try and move from yellow/red to green, receives information on local resources to assist in these efforts, and then later reports progress or lack thereof at some time post-baseline, typically six months for SIGNAL and Move Forward Elmira, and twelve months for South Africa.

In South Africa, individual households self-diagnose their quality of life in a confidential setting that is facilitated by a trained Stoplight facilitator. The twelve month follow up time is to allow mind-sets to change, to shift into new behavior, and for new behavior to become a permanent pattern of sustained change. Results from second surveys conducted less than nine to twelve months later has generally been found to be inconclusive. Ultimately, green represents a status of independence and dignity for that indicator, whereas yellow indicates “struggling but trying,” and red indicates “stuck.” This is the language that clients in South Africa understand and can relate to.

Several limitations of the study should be noted before turning to the study findings. First, that the three programs are not equal insofar as the scale and geographic reach of the programs are quite different. The program in South Africa works with over 80 organizations throughout the country, including nonprofits, social enterprises, and businesses. The UK program also works with multiple organizations, whereas the US program is focused more narrowly on three low-income census tracts in the City of Elmira. Thus, the programs are conducted at different scales, and none is nationally representative. The data for this study represent a set of three efforts to fight poverty, are not strictly comparable, and reflect different scales of operation and differing

local and national contexts. Each program uses the same methods for identifying and coding poverty indicators, and in selecting indicators to move from poverty to nonpoverty.

The US has a different deployment model relative to SA and the UK, however they have common ground because of the common Poverty Stoplight methodology. The Poverty Stoplight tool can facilitate change and transformation at a household level where a facilitator has the competence to build rapport and then use the tools of co-production to create agency. This process done correctly can spark the household to move out of poverty. So, while the US model deploys this process directly, South Africa and the UK train organizations and coach facilitators to do exactly the same.

The reports from the three programs are presented as three tables: those indicators most often coded green are termed without deprivation and presented in Table 1, those indicators most often coded yellow/red are areas of

Table 1. Poverty indicators self-coded without deprivation.

South Africa	United Kingdom	United States
Personal identification	Sanitation	Human rights
Vaccinations	Personal hygiene	Diversity
Respect for other cultures	Sexual health	Garbage collection
Human rights awareness	Vaccinees	Information access
Moral values, conscience	Household violence	Access to water & toilet
Cultural traditions and heritage	Health services	Access to electricity
Literacy in English	Cooking facilities	Telephone access
Appreciation of art and beauty	Appliances	Refrigerator

Table 2. Poverty indicators self-coded as having deprivation.

South Africa	United Kingdom	United States
Family savings	Varied income	Credit
Access to credit facilities	Income	Savings
Income/earnings above the poverty line	Insurance	Income
Stable employment and income sources	Family savings	Voting
Entertainment and recreation	Entertainment	Group activity
Knowledge and skills to generate an income	Group activities	Influence over local government
Capacity to plan and budget	Voting	Entertainment
Substance abuse	Credit access	Stability
Violence		Healthy teeth
Regular and affordable transport		Insurance

Table 3. Poverty indicators self-coded for change from deprivation to without deprivation.

South Africa	United Kingdom	United States
Employment	Varied income	Income
Credit	Family savings	Healthy teeth
Varied income	Insurance	Credit
Sanitation and sewerage	Skills to generate income	Voting
Distance and time to work	Literacy	Group activity
Electricity	Entertainment	Budget
Access to quality education	Stable income	Entertainment
Recreation	Group activity	Identification
Family savings	Self-esteem	Insurance

deprivation and presented in [Table 2](#). Finally, indicators most commonly selected for moving to non-poverty are in [Table 3](#) and labeled change from deprivation to without deprivation.

The data collection is relatively comparable across the three programs. Each program uses poverty indicators defined by local or national observation, and the individuals self-score the indicators according to how they perceive their situation, and this changes as conditions and/or perceptions change. Finally, the individuals create their own plan for moving out of poverty by identifying a set indicators to change from red/yellow to green. This study compares reports from the households obtained from Poverty Stoplight program staff in the US, the UK and South Africa.

Results

The pattern of indicators coded without deprivation varies by nationality, and this variation is on display in [Table 1](#). In South Africa, the indicators most often reported without deprivation indicators include “personal identification,” civic measures of respect for other cultures, human rights awareness, and the public health indicator “vaccinations.” Some of this may reflect practices related to the post-Apartheid constitution that sets forth protections for civil rights. In the UK, the most often reported green indicators are clustered in health and personal services including health services, personal hygiene, sexual health, in addition to household violence and household amenities (appliances, cooking facilities). Finally, the list of indicators most often reported ‘green’ in the US includes utilities, information access, telephone access, and the civic indicators “diversity” and “human rights.”

Those indicators coded yellow/red ([Table 2](#), “having deprivation”) by individuals are similar across the three programs at the top-priority level. For each program the top-level yellow/red indicators are income, employment, “varied income,” “family savings,” access to credit, etc. “Entertainment” is also selected for all three countries. Below the top-level are indications of country-specific diversity where substance abuse and violence are mentioned in South Africa. The US program codes “healthy teeth” as yellow/red, perhaps because of limited access to Medicaid-covered care for adult dental services, given that many dentists are reluctant to accept Medicaid-reimbursed clients.

[Table 3](#) demonstrates a similar pattern for all three of the programs in high-priority indicators for positive action, namely the indicators income, and employment. Program leaders in South Africa state that their clients take action on all indicators, but the two most often identified are income and employment. The top levels for the UK and the US are savings, income, and varied income (UK only). In summary, income, access to credit and savings are the primary sources of self-reported deprivation in all three countries

(Table 2), and also constitute those areas where positive action to get out of poverty is most often attempted (Table 3). Perhaps it is unsurprising that poverty programs would converge on the indicator that defines poverty, i.e., low-income. This suggests that in the minds of those below poverty, both the cause of poverty and the solution to poverty are income level and diversity. This statement applies across all three countries.

The findings suggest that income, namely the opportunity for increasing income, is both cause and solution in fighting poverty. This finding is consistent with the international trend in income inequality where the upper percentiles have been gaining at the expense of the lower reaches of the income distribution. Reversing this trend is one logical solution to reducing poverty, however accomplishing this may be difficult because the trend is long-standing.

In South Africa, analysis of program data in 2019 showed that people with green indicators in the Self-Awareness & Motivation dimension were found to be able to turn the rest of the indicators to green the quickest, and were more likely to sustain green status. From this experience the program surmises that focusing on the ‘heart skills’ and internal healing seems to be a highly effective strategy to ramp up agency and activate people to take thought-out risks and try new things that rely upon personal volition.

While increasing income is arguably one critical path in fighting poverty, it is not the only element. Evidence from the three programs confirm that poverty is a multi-dimensional condition with many facets, and that these facets vary by local and national context. Fighting poverty would appear to necessitate fighting on many fronts because there are multiple obstacles preventing the poor from attaining a higher quality of life. Increased income would appear central to fighting poverty but is by no means the only indicator that needs to be addressed. We find evidence that looking at the individual’s life from a multidimensional perspective, and not through the eyes of a pre-determined program, can result in a successful program for eliminating poverty.

Perhaps the most positive element of Poverty Stoplight is its ability to create useful insights about fighting poverty at both household and the broader community/national levels. Examples of household-level successes are reported by the UK SIGNAL under the pseudonyms “Tony” and “Andrea,” two individuals who improved their lives by incorporating positive information from green indicators. For Tony this was a green vaccination indicator resulting from a past volunteer effort in Ghana where he felt he contributed toward the well-being of others (SIGNAL, 2020a). At the moment, Tony came into contact with SIGNAL he was overwhelmed by a set of health disabilities, social isolation from his family, and a lack of labor market success that had

coalesced into psychological depression. Recalling his experience in Ghana empowered him to move his red indicators to green, including employment, personal health, and family relations.

Andrea is a single mother with three disabled sons, and she was suffering physical and mental decline due to heavy care-giving demands (SIGNAL, 2020b). When Andrea read a Facebook post from her SIGNAL mentor suggesting “be kind to yourself,” she began to leave home for brief exercise walks. Upon returning she found her sons cooking and behaving independently and responsibly, and this led to greater self-confidence, regular exercise, and eventually success in turning her red indicators to green.

Both South Africa and “Move Forward Elmira” programs have created national and community-levels of poverty knowledge. In South Africa, the Greenlight Office has generated over 5 years of data from 30,000+ Stoplight surveys. These data address, among other things, the “main challenges to families across South Africa” and “what people change first when starting to earn income” (Bergh, 2021, p. 5). In Elmira, community-level analysis of the Stoplight surveys revealed that achieving individual goals is not possible without services including affordable housing, childcare, and transportation, and that “failure to address the human service component will shortchange” support for moving out of poverty (Move Forward Elmira, 2020, p. 1).

Discussion

The present study endeavors to compare how the poor are fighting poverty across three national contexts, based on a participation in the Poverty Stoplight program. Poverty Stoplight began as a poverty fighting methodology in Paraguay and is based in a set of indicators co-designed between program leaders and the poor themselves, and then identifying a strategy for moving a set of indicators to non-poverty. The intent is to create knowledge where the poor are not objects of anti-poverty policy, but rather subjects with the capacity to change their lives for the better, and ultimately to defeat poverty on a lasting basis.

An important limitation of the study is that it is based upon different program scales within three different national contexts. Poverty Stoplight in the UK and South Africa operate through organizations to reach their clientele, and are large, multi-local efforts. Poverty Stoplight in the US works directly with clients in one community. All three programs use the same methodology in terms of how clients experience the program, hence the ability of the present study to gauge national differences is simultaneously strengthened by methodological sameness, yet may be attenuated by differences in program scale.

Three sets of findings emerge from our investigation. First, that poverty is commonly defined across all three national contexts by the lack of employment and income. Second, that the condition of poverty is multi-dimensional and therefore adequate jobs and income are part of the solution, but by no means the complete solution. Finally, that the household-level findings from Poverty Stoplight can be aggregated to articulate general knowledge about the conditions facing the poor, and what is being done (or not) to set those conditions right. As Poverty Stoplight programs gather information, this information cumulates and changes as the poor seek the ways and means to relieve themselves of their poverty burden.

Poverty Stoplight creates forms of knowledge based in the real conditions and self-interested activity of the poor in attempting to move to non-poverty. This knowledge is not restricted by government statistics or by the biases of political leaders, as is typical of much poverty knowledge. It is knowledge that reflects the independent interest of those living in poverty.

Eliminating poverty “everywhere” is one explicit goal within the United Nations (2021) sustainable development framework. It is hard to imagine this goal succeeding in the absence of efforts by the poor themselves. Poverty Stoplight presents one methodology for relating anti-poverty effort across communities, regions, and nations in ways that corresponds to the efforts of the poor to eliminate their poverty. It is difficult to imagine eliminating global in the absence of the kind of activity organized by Poverty Stoplight.

There are significant variations in race and class hierarchy across the three national contexts included in this study, and that diminishing these hierarchies would appear to be a strategic element in designs to reduce and/or eliminate poverty. For many, eliminating poverty may appear as a lofty and unattainable goal, however we would argue that doing so becomes feasible in the context of new technologies, new institutions, new thinking, and new methods for organizing the economy. In creating these new approaches, reducing the race/class gradient is arguably a necessary element.

The continuing development of post-industrial technology poses profound challenges and opportunities for efforts to reduce poverty. This technology tends to reduce production costs by downsizing inputs, including those in the workforce performing unskilled and routine tasks. In this context we find reason to support the United Nations’ goal of eliminating poverty everywhere. Pursuing this goal in the context of technological change promises to bear fruit where the old methods for reducing poverty through programmatic efforts by national states are proving insufficient. In the emerging post-industrial economy, the ability of many to find work would appear to be limited, and income is concentrating within the minority at the top of the hierarchy. New methods of economic distribution would appear to be necessary, and the concept of eliminating poverty is one foundational principle for crafting new methods.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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