

African Poverty by Numbers: A historical perspective on evidence, definitions and narratives

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There is a disconnection between the theoretical and historical underpinnings of how we understand and define poverty in Africa, and how it has been measured in practice. This paper reviews ‘poverty’ in African economic development is usually used shorthand for a very specific monetary measure of poverty. The measurement of monetary poverty is a time and resource consuming exercise. The paper briefly reviews how ‘poverty’ was understood by governments in colonial and post-colonial British Africa, before the paper offers a review of the expansion of Household Budget Surveys for poverty analysis, with a particular focus on the Living Standard Measured Standards as financed by the World Bank from the 1980s. Finally, the paper takes stock of the current knowledge about poverty by numbers in Africa, and offers an evaluation of the blind spots and potential policy implications deriving from the very specific form ‘poverty’ has taken in the development community.