

The history of African poverty by numbers: Evidence and vantage points¹

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ABSTRACT Poverty has a long history in Africa. Yet, the most influential history of African poverty is a very short one. The history of poverty as told by numbers by the World Bank starts in the 1980s with the first Living Standard Measured Surveys. It is also a very narrow one. There is a disconnect between the theoretical and historical underpinnings of how academics understand and define poverty in Africa, and how it has been quantified in practice. While it is generally agreed that poverty is multidimensional, and has certain time and location specific aspects, the shorthand for ‘poverty’ is the dollar per day metric. This article reviews how particular notions of poverty knowledge have gained prominence and thus shaped the dominant interpretation of poverty in Africa. It reviews other numerical evidence that suggests that the history of Poverty in Africa could be radically different from the dominant interpretation today.

In popular and contemporary debates ‘Poverty’ and ‘Africa’ are sometimes presented as intimately linked. Yet, this direct association is relatively recent.³ In 1970s, when A.G. Hopkins wrote his *Economic History of West Africa*, the myth he first had to dispel was that of ‘Merry Africa’,⁴ whereas in 2009 he reflected on how Africa was depicted as a continent of poverty, as in the ‘Make

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³In a keynote address ‘Paupers. Percentiles. Precarity. Analytics for poverty studies in Africa’, paper presented at the conference ‘The History of Poverty in Africa: A Central Question?’ Heyman Center, Columbia University, 6–7 March 2014, Jane Guyer reiterated the need to historicize poverty. She explained that her first field work took her from Northern England to Northern Nigeria and remarked that at that time it was not necessarily evident that she was travelling from a case of affluence to a case of extreme poverty. See her contribution to this forum.

⁴ A.G. Hopkins, *An Economic History of West Africa* (London, 1973).

Poverty History' campaign of 2005.⁵ Economic analysis of African economic growth and poverty has tended to have as a starting point that growth is chronically failed, and poverty is persistent. This does not match up with the work of African historians, who for instance have long argued that peasant producers and workers were relatively prosperous between 1940 and 1970.⁶ Nor is mid-twentieth-century prosperity it completely unknown to economists. Bourguignon and Morrison found using a large database of compiled household surveys that 'in 1950 12 percent of world inhabitants with incomes less than half the world median lived in Africa. By 1992, 30 percent did', yet these changes in poverty over time have little influence on how the history of poverty in Africa by numbers is told.⁷ At one level, something as mundane as the historical vantage points play a role here. Recent and contemporary events loom large, and frame research questions, so that although relative prosperity in Africa was commonplace in the 1970s, it has proven easy to lose track of such comparative data points in the midst of the 'African Growth Tragedy' or the 'Lost Decades' of the 1980s and 1990s.⁸

A main contributing factor to the ahistorical approach to poverty is the availability of quantitative evidence on poverty. Dominant research questions are motivated by the availability of data points, and that the problem is that what constitutes relevant data points has been limited in the mainstream economic analysis to World Bank surveys of poverty. Once we widen the scope of evidence here the approach to understanding poverty in Africa should change considerably.

⁵ A.G. Hopkins, 'The new economic history of Africa', *The Journal of African History*, 50:2 (2009) , 155-77.

⁶ Though, how this positive change in formal economies through wages and labour participation should be interpreted, in particular in the context of the so called dual economies, was subject to fierce debate.

⁷ F. Bourguignon and C. Morrison, 'Inequality among world citizens: 1820-1992', *The American Economic Review*, 92:4 (2002), 739.

⁸ Both notions popularized by the title of journal articles by William Easterly.

A long standing complaint among economic historians is the ignorance of the potential of the African economic past to enrich contemporary economic analysis.⁹ Patrick Manning warned in the 1980s that ‘future work in African economic history will be conditioned fundamentally by the limits on available data, and by the success or failure of projects to generate or systematize further data’.¹⁰ While Manning did not subscribe to a narrow interpretation of data, I think here he was referring to datasets that can be easily used by other scholars, as a way of stimulating further work.¹¹ In the same survey article he suggested that the key reason that African economic history was not present at economics meetings, was precisely because of the lack of availability of such datasets.

The key contribution of this article is to present some such data that has been published and collated in the past decade, and to discuss how that changes our interpretation of poverty in Africa in the twentieth century. Before doing so the paper briefly assesses the stock of knowledge about poverty rates and levels in Sub-Saharan Africa since the 1980s. This is important because there is a misunderstanding in the literature where we seem to overrate the quality of contemporary evidence and underrate the relative quality of historical evidence. This false appreciation of relative data quality has, amongst other things, meant that the history of poverty by numbers is very short, and more generally the lack of long time series data on growth and poverty has caused what can be called a ‘compression of history’.¹² How economic historians of Africa have responded to the economic literature which has highlighted the historical factors shaping

⁹ A.G. Hopkins, ‘The World Bank in Africa: historical reflections on the African present’, *World Development*, 14:12 (1986), 1473-87; P. Manning, ‘The prospects for African economic history: is today included in the long run?’ *African Studies Review* 30:2 (1987), 49–62.

¹⁰ Manning, ‘The prospects’.

¹¹ He does for instance refer to the work of Berry, that uses oral sources to trace development in West Africa during the cocoa boom.

¹² G. Austin, ‘The ‘reversal of fortune’ thesis and the compression of history: perspectives from African and comparative economic history’, *Journal of International Development*, 20 (2008), 996-1027.

contemporary outcomes is the topic of the second half of the paper, but first it is worthwhile to diagnose the knowledge problem that shaped the approach of economists to the history of poverty in Africa.

Historical and Contemporary Data on Poverty and Growth

The availability and the character of poverty numbers and economic statistics has shaped the historical analysis of poverty and growth in Sub-Saharan Africa. Quantitative economic histories of economic growth are written using time-series data on economic growth. In this case ‘year 1’ has been 1960, and hence economists have focused on the post-colonial period.¹³ Most databases, such as the World Development Indicators maintained by the World Bank only go back to 1960. While reporting of National Accounts in industrialized countries goes back to before the second world war in many cases, a near global systematic coverage was first available in the 1960s.¹⁴ The first compendium that contained GDP data for all countries published by the World Bank was called the World Bank Atlas and was published in 1966. It contained two estimates for each country: its population, and its per capita gross national product in US dollars, both for 1964.¹⁵ However, one writes histories of poverty by number, using the dollar-a-day metric, ‘year 1’ has been 1990. The dollar-a-day definition of global destitution made its debut in the bank’s 1990 World Development Report.¹⁶ The Povcalnet database, maintained at the

¹³ But there are also datasets and archives that could have been used, but have not been, as argued in M. Jerven, ‘A clash of disciplines? Economists and historians approaching the African past’, *Economic History of Developing Regions*, 26:2 (2011), 111-24.

¹⁴ For a review see, M. Jerven, ‘An unlevel playing field: national income estimates and reciprocal comparison in global economic history’, *Journal of Global History*, 7: 1 (2012), 107-28.

¹⁵ International Bank of Reconstruction and Development, *World Bank Atlas of Per Capita Product and Population*, (Washington DC, 1966).

¹⁶ Martin Ravallion, then a researcher at the World Bank, is usually credited with this innovation.

World Bank collects the poverty survey data, going back as early as 1985 for Cote D'Ivoire, but generally the baseline of 1990 has been considered the starting point since there are very few datapoints before the 1990s, and because 1990 was chosen as the baseline for MDG 1.¹⁷ Both 1960 and 1990 are, of course, artificial starting points, but data availability restricts us to this time frame, and what kinds of questions can be investigated.

The narratives of economic growth in African economies change dramatically if the starting point of 1960 in the history of economic growth in Africa is rejected. Notions such as 'chronic growth failure' and the 'bottom billion' would not hold if we disbanded the short time horizon.¹⁸ Similarly, narratives of trends in living standards in Africa are shaped by the current configuration of what constitutes poverty knowledge at the World Bank. The short history of poverty by numbers in Africa is misleading because it fails to contextualize the history of poverty in the 1990s and 2000s in a longer time perspective.

The dearth of immediately available data on trajectories of poverty has led researchers to take short cuts when studying long-term historical roots of poverty in Africa. Rather than carefully outlining the trajectory in economic growth or poverty over past centuries, the economic literature is content treating GDP per capita today as standing in for lack of growth in the past. Thus, according to this method, if you can correlate the income distribution today with some explanatory variable in the past, you have found the historical roots of Africa's relative poverty.

This 'new African economic history', as Hopkins coined it, was claimed to be 'causal history' by Fenske: "practitioners of causal history focus on identifying causal historical relationships, which sets them apart from the qualitative 'old' economic historians and from much

¹⁷ Target 1.A: Halve, between 1990 and 2015, the proportion of people whose income is less than \$1.25 a day.

¹⁸ In particular, if economists had not focused so much on the average growth shortfall in Africa, and more on temporal change. M. Jerven, *Africa: Why Economists Got It Wrong* (New York, 2015).

of the ‘new’ economic history’.¹⁹ Presenting new econometric history as a causal history and setting aside old, non-econometric history as non-causal amounts to a blanket statement about methodological superiority. At the very least, both the methodologies of economics and history are necessary to grasp the causes of poverty,²⁰ privileging one over the other can only lead to misconceptions, and most certainly leads us down a road where we actively ignore knowledge. Take the example of *The African Poor: A History* by John Iliffe, which unearthed historical causes of poverty.²¹ Iliffe traces and defines the different forms that poverty has taken through time and space in Africa. In this interpretation, poverty is multidimensional and thus defies simple quantification and advanced econometric testing.²² Further, Iliffe identifies two types of poverty: structural poverty and conjunctural poverty and argues that each type of poverty has different causes and trend-lines. Conjunctural poverty relates to time and place and is rooted in economic shocks such as famine and war. On the other hand, structural poverty relates to an economy’s systemic poverty, a figure that varies with deeper changes in the political economy. This nuanced understanding of poverty is lost in the quantitative methods of the ‘new economic history of Africa’. Iliffe used historical observations of poverty in Africa to identify plausible patterns of causality but did not apply tests of statistical causality to his theories. This is a pragmatic solution to dealing with the nature of the evidence. If the usefulness evidence is

¹⁹ J. Fenske, ‘The causal history of Africa: A response to Hopkins’, *Economic History of Developing Regions*, 25:2 (2010), 180. This debate on the ‘new African economic history’ was initiated by a contribution in this journal by Hopkins; see A.G. Hopkins, ‘The new economic history’. See Jerven, ‘A clash’ and Jerven, *Africa* for a review.

²⁰ And more, it is an interdisciplinary effort. See, J. Harriss, ‘The case for cross-disciplinary approaches in international development’, *World Development*, 30:3 (2002), 487-496

²¹ J. Iliffe, *The African Poor: A History* (Cambridge, 1987).

²² It is fair to say that this is the mainstream scholarly interpretation of poverty, outside economics. This interpretation of course owes a great deal to the cross-disciplinary work (in economics and philosophy) of Amartya Sen.

determined not by what it tells us, but by how it can be statistically tested then credible information would be discarded.²³

Iiffe highlighted the inadequacy of numerical sources as one of the key obstacles confronting the study of African poverty. Cautioning against an overreliance on oral traditions and traditions and generalized descriptions, Iiffe suggests that records of poverty in documents such as missionary letters, travelers' journals, and administrators' reports might be the next best alternative.²⁴ To that list one could add that information can be obtained through the meticulous study of population censuses from the colonial period.²⁵ Rhiannon Stephens also shows how oral sources can complement linguistic and archeological evidence.²⁶ Citing a lack of written data, especially prior to 1860, Stephens uses a mixture of these sources (and others) to help reveal the social, political, and economic history of African motherhood. Such endeavors will become less and less accessible to us if our study of poverty is limited by and to numbers.

The study of historical trajectories of growth and poverty in Sub-Saharan Africa has been limited by the databases. First of all there has been a failure to appreciate the multidimensionality of poverty, with today's reductive approaches commonly using the term 'poverty' as a shorthand for a very specific monetary measure, such as the world poverty headcount issued by the World Bank. In principle, the poverty headcount is a universal measure of how many people (in absolute terms, or as a proportion of the population) have insufficient income to cover a basket of subsistence goods.²⁷ Of course, if the poverty problem would have

²³ Iiffe, *The African Poor*, 143.

²⁴ *Ibid.* 2-3.

²⁵ B. Fetter, 'Decoding and interpreting African census data: vital evidence from an unsavory witness', *Cahiers d'Etudes Africaines*, 27:105 (1987), 83–105.

²⁶ R. Stephens, 'The bereft, selfish and hungry: Greater Luhyia concepts of the poor in precolonial East Africa', *The American Historical Review*, 123:3 (2018), forthcoming; R. Stephens 'Poverty's pasts: a case for *Longue Durée* Studies', this volume.

²⁷ \$1.90 a day as of October, 2015

been conceived as a relative measure, reflecting in-country inequality, it would have produced a radically different global discourse on poverty.

The use of numbers in social sciences, is usually justified because it adds rigor and reliability, but on closer inspection the poverty numbers are often far from as credible as presented. The global number is based on small or nonexistent samples at the local level. Household surveys covering a few thousand households are conducted infrequently and in some of the countries.²⁸ The ability to collect consistent survey data on poverty is constrained by problems with both design and implementation.

Using current methodology, if you want to assess poverty levels in any given country it will take about one million US dollars and 2-3 years from initiation to completion.²⁹ Once the survey data is available, the first step is to use foreign exchange rates to express the income of one country in the currency of another. However differences in domestic prices on non-tradable goods, cause a divergence in purchasing power parity (PPP).³⁰ To achieve PPP, one needs to adjust for the fact that one dollar goes a lot farther in a country like Burundi than it does in a country like Belgium. This entails a complicated process of collecting local prices, weighting them appropriately, then constructing a basket of goods and services for each country and comparing their costs against one another.³¹

²⁸ U. Serajuddin et al., 'Data deprivation: another deprivation to end', *World Bank Policy Research Working Paper* 7252, World Bank (2015). <http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/700611468172787967/Data-deprivation-another-deprivation-to-end>

²⁹ M. Jerven, 'How much will a data revolution in development cost?', *Forum for Development Studies*, 44:1 (2017), 31-50.

³⁰ A.M. Taylor and M.P. Taylor, 'The purchasing power parity debate', *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, 18:4 (2004), 135-58.

³¹ A. Deaton and A. Heston, 'Understanding PPPs and PPP-based national accounts', *American Economic Journal: Macroeconomics*, 2:4 (2010), 1-35.

Since 1970, there have been eight rounds in the International Comparison Program that collects the price data needed for the PPP conversion with the most recent in 2011. Participation from African countries has been uneven in these rounds. In 1970 and 1973 only Kenya participated. In 1980, Kenya was joined by Malawi and Zambia, while the number of participating countries increased to cover more than half of the continent in 1993.³² Only 11 of 48 SSA countries have completed regular Living Standards Measurement Studies. If you widen the data to include other types of poverty surveys, as of 2012, only 25 of 48 countries had at least two surveys available for tracking poverty trends over the past decade. In the remaining 23 that is, there is not enough information to say something about the direction of change. For five countries representing 5 per cent of the African population, there is no data for measuring poverty at all.³³ Beyond availability of data, there are questions of sampling, survey design and other errors in measurement that weaken the view that the poverty numbers are of such quality that they merit the very strong role it has in motivating research questions and shaping conventional wisdom about ‘poverty’.³⁴

As the study of poverty excludes alternative sources of information from consideration, so too does it shorten the history of poverty that is being analyzed. A number-centric and particularly a monetarily-focused perspective on the history of poverty in Africa is particularly limiting in that it explicitly leaves some information out. This is true from the perspective of econometricians, for whom the availability of quantitative evidence represents the boundary of investigation. Thus, one way of driving the literature forward is by expanding the quantitative horizon backwards.

³² There is little way of guaranteeing the actual provenance of these price data.

³³ K.G. Beegle et al., *Poverty in a Rising Africa: Overview* (Washington, DC, 2015).

³⁴ For a fuller review of poverty measurement problems see M. Jerven, ‘Development by numbers’, *Development Research Institute NYU, Working Paper*, Development Research Institute NYU (2016).
<https://www.nyudri.org/research-index/2016/devbnumbers>

Extending the history of poverty by numbers: new evidence

Because historical numbers on poverty are scarce, many of the ‘historical’ papers often use evidence from a very recent past.³⁵ However, a ‘renaissance in African Economic History’ has stimulated a wave of new archival research aimed at measuring poverty and living standards particularly for the colonial period.³⁶ Observations are still indicative, and suffer from many limitations. Nevertheless, whereas the previous section has argued that our knowledge on poverty by numbers in the recent post-colonial period is overrated, the following will suggest that our knowledge of trends in ‘poverty’, or at the very least, ‘living standards’. in the colonial period might be underrated.

a) Living Standards and Real Wages

Real wages series calculates the cost of goods that workers consumed at over a given time period and compared them to the nominal wages in the same time period, thus giving us a measure of the real change in living standards. Price data is compiled for a ‘bare-bones’ subsistence basket of goods—the absolute minimum daily requirements for an adult male.³⁷ Historical prices are compiled from a variety of sources to calculate how much the basket would have cost at any given time, and compared to nominal wages received by unskilled labour. Standardizing income and needs in this way allows comparison of well-being across both time and distance. Frankema and van Waijenburg used this approach in their analysis of living standards in eight British African colonies

³⁵ Morten Jerven, *The Relativity of Poverty and Income: How Reliable Are African Economic Statistics?*, *African Affairs*, 109:434, pp. 77-96, 2010.

³⁶ G. Austin and S. Broadberry, ‘Introduction: the renaissance of African economic history’, *The Economic History Review*, 67:4 (2014), 893–906.

³⁷ It is then assumed that an average family of two adults and two to three children would require three of these consumption baskets, the equivalent of a household subsistence basket.

from 1880 to 1940.³⁸ Specifically, they argue that real wages exceeded subsistence levels for this period and that wages in a selection of the colonies studied actually exceeded those in major Asian cities. Further, the authors highlight that a divergence of paths has occurred not only between Africa and comparable Asian locations but also within the African continent. They point to the different paths that led to present-day poverty and challenge the argument that colonial institutions and path dependency are at the root of poverty in African countries.³⁹ The central argument in the colonial legacies literature is that the colonial impact led these countries on a path towards failure, and that political pressures made sure that they remained on this development path.

Frankema and van Waijenburg's paper specifically addressed what they perceive to be a central claim of the literature, namely that African poverty has been persistent over time because of 'structural growth impediments'. The economic literature has suggested many root causes of lack of growth, such as the colonial impact, the disease environment or slave exports, but take it as given that Africa has failed. Yet, real wage data presented by Frankema and van Waijenburg paints a far more positive picture on former British colonies showed persistent growth in urban real wages from the 1880s into the 1960s, and that in some periods and some locations this growth was very rapid. In British West Africa annual growth rates typically averaged, but sometimes exceeded, 2-3 percent. In East and Southern Africa, there was growth throughout, yet at a lower rate of between 1 and 2 percent annually.

³⁸ E. Frankema and M. van Waijenburg, 'African real wages in Asian perspective, 1880–1940', *Center for Global Economic History Working Paper No. 2*, Center for Global Economic History (2011).

http://www.cgeh.nl/sites/default/files/WorkingPapers/CGEH.WP_No2_FrankemavanWaijenburg.jan2011.pdf

³⁹ de Zwart followed the same methodology in his calculation of real wages in Cape Colony (present-day South Africa) from its founding in 1652 to unification in 1910. See, P. de Zwart, 'Real wages at the Cape of Good Hope: a long-term perspective, 1652–1912', *Tijdschrift Voor Sociale en Economische Geschiedenis*, 10:2 (2013), 28-58. Ronnback used trade company books to calculate wages in pre-colonial Ghana. K. Rönnbäck, 'Living standards on the pre-colonial Gold Coast: a quantitative estimate of African laborers' welfare ratios', *European Review of Economic History*, 18:2 (2014), 185-202.

Using similar evidence, yet not the same subsistence baskets, Bowden, Chiripanpanhura and Mosley compiled wage data, poverty data and real wage data for three settler economies (South Africa, Zimbabwe and Kenya) and three peasant economies (Ethiopia, Uganda and Ghana) and compared long term trends in trajectories and levels of living standards.⁴⁰ Their main contribution is to challenge the thesis by Acemoglu, Johnson and Robinson that suggests that higher levels of European settlement led to more productive institutions that predicted better economic outcomes today, and that on the contrary higher levels of poverty, and in particular lower wages, were observed in the settler economies. One issue that has not dealt with explicitly in the literature is whether low wages could be interpreted as a potential of growth, and that relatively high wages in Africa might be interpreted as an obstacle for economic progress.

Their investigation shows that real wages stagnated in the settler economies, whereas in the peasant economies (Uganda and Ghana) real wages rose markedly from the 1910s into the 1970s. These datasets allow for a long-term historical reading of poverty in Africa, and raise questions about viewing poverty as a structural African

The new data points are chiefly drawn from the colonial period. However, the large argument made here is also a point supported by Rönnbäck's analysis.⁴¹ Rönnbäck provides estimates of living standards using wages from commercial records in pre-colonial Gold Coast. He uses the same methodology, calculating welfare ratios (nominal wages divided by cost of subsistence basket) for canoemen, and concludes that living standards were similar to other parts of the world. Borrowing again from Iliffe, it may be

⁴⁰ S.B. Bowden, B. Chiripanpanhura, and P. Mosley, 'Measuring and explaining poverty in six African countries: a long period approach', *Journal of International Development*, 20:8 (2008), 1049-79.

⁴¹ Rönnbäck, 'Living standards'.

more appropriate to view the high incidence of poverty in modern Africa as a conjunctural problem from the 1980s onwards, coinciding with the appearance of the much more influential databases of the World Bank.

b) Anthropometrics and Living Standards

Another method used to measure poverty draws on anthropometrics. Specifically, researchers have used mean adult height as a measure of well-being. Stunted adult height is a result of the deprivation of essential needs in childhood. Conditions of childhood poverty have a *ceteris paribus* effect of stunting growth, though commonly height reflects the physical quality of life more generally, incorporating the quantity and quality of childhood nutrition, housing, sanitation, and medical care.⁴² Anthropometrics seek to preempt the critique that genetics impact height by using average population height. When one aggregates to the population level, the influence of genetics is cancelled out, and are irrelevant when comparisons are done over time for one population.⁴³ At the macro-level, it is suggested that the genetic pool can be assumed to be fairly constant given the relatively short period of time that such studies typically focus on.⁴⁴

The use of average height as a measure for quality of life has a variety of advantages. First, because height is an outcome (rather than an input, like income) of well-being, this method does not discriminate between different varieties of input (avoiding the need to standardize consumption baskets) or make any assumptions about basic minimum requirements. The primary point of interest is whether individuals' nutritional and medical condition was sufficient to meet their

⁴² A. Moradi, 'Towards an objective account of nutritional health in colonial Kenya: a study of stature in African army recruits and civilians, 1880–1980', *Journal of Economic History*, 69:3 (2009), 723–4.

⁴³ G. Austin, J. Baten and A. Moradi, 'Exploring the evolution of living standards in Ghana, 1880–2000: an anthropometric approach', paper presented at the annual meeting of the Economic History Society, Exeter, 2007. <http://www.ehs.org.uk/dotAsset/896f8e5d-6516-4b25-9e4e-e8665e79da5f.pdf>

⁴⁴ Moradi, 'Towards', 723.

needs. Further, height measures are applicable to the diverse socioeconomic conditions of developing countries (hunters, pastoralists, subsistence farmers, urban labourers) and thus facilitate comparison across groups. Mean height is also sensitive to inequality in that the diminishing returns of nutritional input on height, redistribution from rich to poor will mean population measure. Finally, the height data allows for statistical insight into periods for which other measures of poverty are lacking.⁴⁵

Such methods are generally restricted to relative measures of well-being. Specifically, mean adult heights are compared across for different birth cohorts. If one cohort has a greater mean height than another cohort in the same location, well-being is assumed to have increased through an improvement in overall well-being. The most readily available height records prior to regular survey data is typically found in documents associated with the slave trade or colonial armies. Of course, these samples are not random and they may not always have been representative. A preference for physically fit (taller) slaves could skew the sample mean, and military enlistment was often voluntary, paid, and subject to minimum height requirements.

Given such concerns, it is important for researchers to have an intimate familiarity with their dataset and with the dynamics of the region(s) being analyzed. Considerable attention has been dedicated to demonstrating that datasets are either representative of the broader population or using econometric techniques that assure readers that they are representative. For example, in analyzing Dutch recruits born in Ghana and Burkina Faso between 1800 and 1840, Austin, Baten and van Leeuwen have suggested that because the

⁴⁵ A. Moradi, 'Confronting colonial legacies: lessons from human development in Ghana and Kenya, 1880–2000', *Journal of International Development*, 20:8 (2008), 1109–10.

soldiers in their dataset were mostly purchased from slave owners, bias associated with volunteering was unlikely.⁴⁶

Further, they find no evidence of a height premium and thus dismiss the idea that a sample of slaves would be taller on average than the general population from which it was drawn. This addresses two different, but related, concerns. First, that slaves from genetically taller regions would be overrepresented in the population and second, that a higher price (and therefore demand) would be associated with slaves from within any given population. In response to these concerns they draw on Eltis' research that finds a 'small or even negligible' height bias between the height of slaves relative to the populations that they came from.⁴⁷ Related to the first concern of regional bias, Eltis found no difference in price for slaves from relatively taller and relatively shorter regions – which would have been expected if there was a greater demand for taller slaves. With regards to the second concern of a height bias within a given population, the authors point to a normal height distribution among slaves from all regions. This supports the conclusion of no height bias as a skewed distribution would have been expected if one was present. The authors conclude their response to these concerns with the logic that 'slave raiders, and victorious armies, had an interest in capturing everyone who could move.'⁴⁸ After correcting for the effect of regional origin and minimum height requirements, Austin, Baten and van Leeuwen compared average heights in Burkina Faso and Ghana with those in other regions of the world and found that these African countries are further behind the global norm today than they were two hundred years ago.

⁴⁶ G. Austin, J. Baten and B. van Leeuwen, 'The biological standard of living in early nineteenth-century West Africa: new anthropometric evidence for northern Ghana and Burkina Faso', *Economic History Review*, 65:4 (2012), 1280–302.

⁴⁷ D. Eltis, 'Nutritional trends in Africa and the Americas: heights of Africans', *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, 12:3 (1982), 453-75.

⁴⁸ Austin, Baten and van Leeuwen, 'The biological', 1288.

Meanwhile, Austin, Baten, and Moradi's analysis of regional inequality in Ghana from 1880 to 2000 found that living standards improved during colonial times and then regressed after the economic crisis of the 1970s.⁴⁹ In doing so, they employed data from a variety of periods and sources. First, attestation forms from the Gold Coast Regiment facilitated the estimation of average heights for those born between the 1880s and 1920s. The authors use regression analysis in order to establish mean heights that were more representative of the population. They then compared these averages with data taken from the 1987/88 Ghana Living Standard Survey and Demographic Health Surveys (DHSs) from 1988, 1993, 1998/1999, and 2003 in order to evaluate the development of regional differences in Ghana over time.

Moradi followed a similar methodology in further refuting the notion that contemporary poverty is rooted in colonial legacies.⁵⁰ Again using records from colonial armies, he argued that Ghana and Kenya experienced significant improvements in health and well-being as measured by average population height. Moradi compared improvements in this metric with data from other developing countries to demonstrate that Ghana and Kenya were outperforming comparable international countries between the 1920s and 1970s.

It is worth emphasizing that the observed increases in mean heights in populations living in regions and colonies that were experiencing increases in export revenues from the late nineteenth century into the 1970s provide strong corroborative evidence that underlines the positive historic trend observed in other indicators. Taken alone one might see export

⁴⁹ A. Moradi, G. Austin and J. Baten 'Heights and development in a cash-crop colony: living standards in Ghana, 1870-1980', *African Economic History Working Paper 7/2013*, (2013) African Economic History Network.

⁵⁰ Moradi, 'Towards'; 'Confronting'.

growth and worry about trends in other ‘invisible’ sectors. If one sees increases in real wages, one might still worry about sampling, and distribution. These findings together seem to indicate a more positive and lasting impact of the ‘cash crop revolution’ than previously thought. However, work on distribution and income inequality is still in progress,⁵¹ and we should learn more as further datasets on wages from Francophone and Lusophone Africa become available.

Conclusion

That the international datasets on growth and poverty have shaped the literature and conventional wisdom is understandable. The perceived credibility and comparability of international numbers combine. They are also far more accessible than the colonial ledgers, commercial accounts and army recruiting forms that recent revisionist research has drawn new evidence from. Some of this newly employed evidence such as the colonial blue books, are now available online, contain standardized information, and are thus easier to use than before. One reason they have not been utilised so extensively previously is that there was perhaps a justifiable worry that an exclusive reliance on such sources will essentially retell the story of progress purposefully created by colonial administrators, and thus it is with serious caveats that one writes African history from the imperial archives.

On the other hand, arguably the lack of data from prior to 1960 has led to an ‘which is equally skewed ‘compression of history’. Correlations between present-day poverty and historical factors have had a strong methodological appeal in economic studies. The apparent absence of

⁵¹ One early paper on a project creating social tables to investigate the relative trends in different categories of wage earners in colonial Africa is available, and others are forthcoming, see J. Bolt and E. Hillbom ‘Long-term trends in economic inequality: lessons from colonial Botswana, 1921–74’, *Economic History Review*, 69:4 (2016), 1255–84.

extended time series data made it easier to write as if little or nothing happened between some long-ago point and the present day.

Of course, the quality of many historical numbers that we have on poverty is poor, judged against the sweeping claims derived from current-day databases, the rigor in the data presented in this paper does not compare so unfavorably. When historians are faced methodological bias from the economics discipline it may be tempting to respond by ignoring numerical evidence, and favour alternative sources of knowledge. However, one should be careful not to draw a line in the sand between quantitative and non-quantitative studies of poverty or between quantitative methods and historical analysis in general. Stephens, who has written a history of motherhood in Uganda over a long time-period, faced the source availability constraints we would expect, particularly in the period before 1800.⁵² Her approach is instructive. She is aware that her oral history records may be biased, but then seeks to corroborate the oral testimonies with linguistic evidence, and in particular with the use of lexicostatistics. Thus, historical linguistic methodology brings together many types of fragmented historical evidence, rather than telling a story that relies on quantitative or qualitative methods alone. In a similar vein, this review article seeks to encourage studies that make use of a multitude of historical methods to query current wisdoms and lengthen historical perspective on the incidence of poverty in Africa. The dominant narrative on poverty in Africa is a numbercentric narrative – it does not have to be that way. It is striking now to remember that not so long ago it was generally accepted that poverty was multidimensional, and even that the poor had a say in defining what constituted poverty – as exemplified in the World Development Report and the work of

⁵² Stephens, *A history of Africa motherhood: the case of Uganda, 700-1900* (Cambridge, 2013).

Chambers in the 1990s.⁵³ Such nuanced understanding was largely swept aside as the dollar a day measure was codified as ‘poverty’ in the adaptation of the Millennium Development Goal.

Partly conditioned by the availability of data, the overwhelming emphasis in the mainstream economic literature has been to explain the relative poverty of African economies vis-à-vis the West and other emerging regions. This has only been possible through the appearance of imagined or stylized facts about Africa. The first derives from the economic growth literature in the 1990s onwards that focused on explaining slow growth in Africa. The imagined event that arose from this was that there was a chronic failure of economic growth in Africa. The use of average growth rates in the post-colonial period (1965-1995) and the brevity of the time series utilized combined to mean that periods of rapid expansion in the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s and again from the late 1990s into the 2000s and 2010s were ignored and explanations for growth in Africa were unduly colored by the downturn the 1980s.⁵⁴ With datasets, or at the very least strong qualitative information, documenting growth at least since the 1910s such a perspective would not hold the test of time.⁵⁵ Instead the frame of ‘chronic failure’ was embodied in the phrase ‘the Bottom Billion’, and a first level of conflation arose: gradually, in the literature in the 2000s the task of explaining slow growth was conflated with the task of explaining low GDP per capita ‘today’. Of course, at some level, low income ‘today’ could mean no growth ‘yesterday’ but that is a testable, though yet unproven hypothesis, and has been shown to be a shaky foundation for a literature purporting to explain the historical roots of poverty. The second level of conflation was made

⁵³ D. Narayan et al. *Can Anyone Hear Us? Voices of the Poor* (New York, 2000).

⁵⁴ Jerven, *Africa*.

⁵⁵ M. Jerven, ‘A West African experiment: constructing a GDP series for colonial Ghana, 1891–1950’, *Economic History Review*, 67:4 (2014), 964–92; M. Jerven, ‘African growth recurring: an economic history perspective on African growth episodes, 1690–2010’, *Economic History of Developing Regions*, 25:2 (2010), 127–54.

possible by approaching poverty as ‘absolute deprivation’ so that high poverty today is conflated with low GDP per capita today.

Some of the evidence reviewed in this article points to newer stylized facts. One is that the ‘gap’ in living standards between African and non-African economies was probably lower a century or two ago. Corroborating evidence indicates that the experience of poverty was not a typical African phenomenon five decades ago. Thus, enriching the database with new historical point estimates offers other comparative frames than the ones we are used to from the contemporary literature. Moreover, from the study of longer term trajectories in growth, poverty, wages and other metrics capturing living standards indicate a long trend of improvement from the 1910s into the 1970s in most African economies.

This raises the possibility that the 1980s, and the narrative of African poverty that was born in the 1980s, constitute a historical anomaly. Such a comparative historical approach may also offer an alternative perspective on the recent ‘Africa Rising’ narrative. First, there is nothing phenomenally new about growth in African economies, and second, the current period of growth and poverty reduction may compare unfavorably to that of the 1960s or even the colonial period.⁵⁶

⁵⁶ The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, *African Economic Outlook 2013* (Paris, 2013).