

## Pro-Poor Growth: A Primer

Martin Ravallion\*

*Development Research Group, World Bank  
1818 H Street NW, Washington DC*

*These days it seems that almost everyone in the development community is talking about “pro-poor growth.” What exactly is it, and how can we measure it? Is ordinary economic growth always “pro-poor growth” or is that some special kind of growth? And if it is something special, what makes it happen? The paper first reviews alternative approaches to defining and measuring “pro-poor growth.” It then turns to the evidence on whether growth is pro-poor, what factors make it more pro-poor (including the role played by both initial inequality and changing inequality), and whether the things that make the distribution of the gains from growth more pro-poor come at a cost to the rate of growth. Some priorities for future research are identified.*

World Bank Policy Research Working Paper 3242, March 2004

*The Policy Research Working Paper Series disseminates the findings of work in progress to encourage the exchange of ideas about development issues. An objective of the series is to get the findings out quickly, even if the presentations are less than fully polished. The papers carry the names of the authors and should be cited accordingly. The findings, interpretations, and conclusions expressed in this paper are entirely those of the authors. They do not necessarily represent the view of the World Bank, its Executive Directors, or the countries they represent. Policy Research Working Papers are available online at <http://econ.worldbank.org>.*

---

\* The author has benefited from the comments of Louise Cord, Francisco Ferreira, Aart Kraay, Sudhir Shetty and Adrian Wood. Support from the Bank’s Poverty Reduction and Economic Management Network is gratefully acknowledged. Address for correspondence: World Bank, 1818 H Street NW, Washington DC, 20433, USA; [mravallion@worldbank.org](mailto:mravallion@worldbank.org).

## Introduction

One finds two quite different definitions of “pro-poor growth” in recent literature and policy-oriented discussions. By one definition it is a situation in which any distributional shifts accompanying economic growth favor the poor, meaning that poverty falls more than it would have if all incomes had grown at the same rate (Baulch and McCulloch, 2000; Kakwani and Pernia, 2000). This definition focuses on changes in inequality during the growth process; roughly speaking, pro-poor growth by this definition requires that the incomes of the poor grow at a higher rate than those of the nonpoor. A concern with this definition is that, in contracting economies, distributional changes can be “pro-poor” with no absolute gain to poor people, or even falling living standards for them. Equally well, a “pro-rich” distributional shift during a period of overall economic expansion may come with large absolute gains to the poor.

The second definition avoids this problem by focusing instead on what happens to poverty. The growth process is said to be “pro-poor” if and only if poor people benefit in absolute terms, as reflected in an appropriate measure of poverty (Ravallion and Chen, 2003). The extent to which growth is pro-poor by this definition depends solely on the rate of change in poverty. Naturally this will depend in part on what happens to distribution, but only in part — it will also depend on what happens to average living standards.

Both definitions beg the question: What measure of poverty should be used? After first addressing that question and the implications for measuring the rate of pro-poor growth, the paper turns to the evidence on whether growth is pro-poor, what factors make it more pro-poor, and whether they will come at a cost to growth.

## **How is pro-poor growth measured?**

As normally defined, “poverty” means that one cannot afford certain pre-determined consumption needs. This is commonly assessed using a comprehensive measure of real consumption or income (including imputed values for consumption or income in-kind, including from own production). This is obtained for randomly sampled households in a socio-economic survey. There is a large literature on the numerous conceptual and practical issues that arise in the measurement of welfare using survey data.<sup>1</sup> Progress in improving the quality (including inter-temporal comparability) of data will be crucial to a better understanding of the issues raised in the following discussion. However, data issues will for the most part be put to one side here.

A key conceptual issue is how the poverty line is to be determined. Here too there is a literature; for an overview of the theory and methods, see Ravallion (1998). A key issue in the present context is the distinction between “absolute poverty” and “relative poverty.” By absolute poverty one means that the poverty line has fixed purchasing power; two households with the same real income are both either “poor” or “not poor.” The poverty line is typically chosen to assure that predetermined nutritional requirements are met, given prevailing diets. By relative poverty one means that the poverty line tends to have higher real value in less poor sub-groups. For example, the poverty line might be set as a constant proportion of mean income. This method can show rising poverty even when the levels of living of the poor have in fact risen. The discussion in this article will confine attention to absolute poverty.

Given a poverty line, how do we measure poverty? The most common measure in practice is the headcount index, given by the estimated proportion of the relevant population living in households with consumption or income below a predetermined poverty line. The

---

<sup>1</sup> For useful overviews of this topic see Deaton (1997, Chapter 3) and Slesnick (1998).

headcount index tells us nothing about what has happened to distribution below the poverty line; for example, if the poorest person becomes poorer then the headcount index will not change. The poverty gap index (the mean income shortfall below the poverty line as a proportion of the line, counting the nonpoor as having zero shortfall) will better reflect changes in average levels of living among the poor. However, it will not reflect changes in distribution among the poor. Measures of poverty have also been proposed that penalize inequality among the poor. The first and arguably still the best measure is the index introduced by Watts (1968). This is simply the population mean of the log of the ratio of the poverty line to censored income, where the latter is actual income for those below the poverty line and the poverty line for those above it (Appendix). Zheng (1993) identifies a complete set of axioms for an ideal poverty measure, for which the Watts index emerges as the unique poverty measure.

Recognizing that there is a degree of uncertainty about the location of a poverty line, it can be important to look at impacts of aggregate economic growth over a wide range of the distribution. A useful tool for this purpose is the “growth incidence curve” (Ravallion and Chen, 2003). This gives the rate of growth over the relevant time period at each percentile of the distribution (ranked by income or consumption per person). Thus at the 50<sup>th</sup> percentile, the figure gives the growth rate of the median income. If the growth incidence curve is above the zero axis at all points up to some percentile  $p^*$  then poverty has fallen for all headcount indices up to  $p^*$  (or all poverty lines up to the value that yields  $p^*$  as the headcount index) and for all poverty measures within a broad class (applying a result found in Atkinson, 1987).

If one calculates the area under the growth incidence curve up to the headcount index then one obtains the total growth in incomes of the poor over the relevant period. The Ravallion-Chen (2003) “rate of pro-poor growth” is the mean growth rate of the poor. This gives the

change in the Watts index per unit time divided by the headcount index. The Appendix discusses the derivation and properties of this measure. Notice that the mean growth rate of the poor is not the same thing as the growth rate in the mean for the poor, which will not in general be consistent with even the direction of change in any sensible measure of the level of poverty (Ravallion and Chen, 2003).

While the Watts index has (arguably) the most attractive properties of any poverty measure, it is still only one of the measures found in the literature. If we consider instead any measure within the Atkinson (1987) class of additive measures of poverty then one can define a measure of pro-poor growth as the weighted mean growth rate, as obtained by weighting each point on the growth incidence curve with the weights appropriate to the specific measure of poverty used (Kraay, 2003).

In describing the impact of economic growth on poverty it can also be useful to exploit the fact that a measure of poverty (such as the headcount index or the Watts index) can be written as a function of the mean of the distribution on which that measure is based and the Lorenz curve of that distribution. (The Lorenz curve gives cumulative income shares as a function of the cumulative proportion of the population ranked by income.) This can be used to decompose changes in poverty over time into a component attributed to growth in the mean, changes in distribution and the interaction effect between these (Datt and Ravallion, 1992). The same mathematical properties of poverty measures can be used to measure the elasticity of poverty to growth in the mean, holding distribution constant (Kakwani, 1993) and to study the analytic properties of that elasticity (Bourguignon, 2001).

A growth process is said to be “distribution neutral” if the growth incidence curve is perfectly flat, in that incomes at all percentiles grow at the same rate, leaving inequality

unchanged. The distributional change can be said to be “pro-poor” if the redistribution component is poverty reducing. In fact the first definition of “pro-poor growth” described at the outset of this article is equivalent to requiring that the redistribution component in the Datt-Ravallion (1992) decomposition for changes in poverty is negative (using final point as reference).

Building on these concepts, the measure of the rate of pro-poor growth proposed by Ravallion and Chen (2003) equals the ordinary rate of growth times a “distributional correction” given by the ratio of the actual change in poverty over time to the change that would have been observed under distribution neutrality. If the distributional shifts favor the poor then the rate of pro-poor growth exceeds the ordinary rate of growth. If the shifts go against the poor then it is lower than the ordinary rate of growth. Thus one can think of the second measure of the rate of pro-poor growth as the first measure times the ordinary rate of growth. We can write the following simple equation for the rate of pro-poor growth:

$$\textit{Rate of pro-poor growth} = \textit{Distributional correction} \times \textit{Ordinary growth rate}$$

When poverty reduction is the objective (for which economic growth is one of the instruments) then the rate of pro-poor growth defined above is the right way to measure growth consistently with that objective.

In studying the impact of growth on poverty, the growth rates can come from either the same surveys used to measure poverty or the national accounts. Using the surveys has the advantage that one is measuring growth in household income or consumption per person. Using surveys also means that time periods and definitions match perfectly with the poverty measures. National accounts by contrast capture much more than household income; even what is called “private consumption” in national accounts is typically calculated in such a way in developing

countries that it includes a number of categories of consumption that are not household consumption (Ravallion, 2003a; Deaton, 2004).

However, using surveys for the growth rates can also lead to overestimation of the correlation between poverty reduction and growth due to measurement errors in surveys, which are passed onto both the mean and the poverty measures. Ravallion (2001) tries to correct for this bias by using the growth rate from the national accounts as an instrumental variable for the growth rate in the survey mean. This assumes that the growth rates from the two sources are correlated, but that their errors are not correlated.

While growth rates from these two data sources tend to be highly correlated, there are some worryingly large differences for some countries (including India in the 1990s) and regions (such as Eastern Europe and Central Asia in the 1990s). Discrepancies in levels and growth rates from these two data sources can stem from various factors; for further discussion see Ravallion (2003a) and Deaton (2004). However, such discrepancies do not imply that poverty measures should instead be based on the mean incomes from the national accounts; indeed, this could well make matters worse (Ravallion, 2003b).

### **Is growth typically pro-poor?**

A common empirical finding in the recent literature is that changes in inequality at the country level have virtually zero correlation with rates of economic growth; see, for example, Ravallion and Chen (1997), Ravallion (2001), Dollar and Kraay (2002). Amongst growing economies, inequality tends to fall about as often as it rises, i.e., growth tends to be distribution neutral on average. For example, across 117 spells between successive household surveys for 47 developing countries I find a correlation coefficient of only 0.06 between annualized changes in

the Gini index and annualized rates of growth in mean household income or consumption as estimated from the same surveys (Ravallion, 2003b).

One must be careful in interpreting such evidence from at least four points of view. Firstly, there is likely to be considerable measurement error in the changes in inequality over time — weakening the power of such tests for detecting the true relationship. Secondly, an inequality index such as the Gini index may not reflect well how changes in distribution have impacted on poverty — that depends on precisely how the distributional changes occur. Thirdly, finding that there is no change in overall inequality can be consistent with considerable “churning” under the surface, with gainers and losers at all levels of living. Fourthly, an unchanging Gini index with growth can mean large increases in absolute income disparities. On the same data set, Ravallion (2003b) finds a strong positive correlation coefficient of 0.64 between annualized changes in the absolute Gini index (in which absolute differences in incomes are not scaled by the mean) and rates of growth in mean household consumption. Growth in average income tends to come with higher absolute disparities in incomes between the “rich” and the “poor.” Arguably, it is the absolute changes that are more obvious to people living in a growing developing economy than the proportionate changes. So it may well be the case that much of the debate about what is happening to inequality in the world is actually a debate about the meaning of “inequality” (Ravallion, 2003b).

While recognizing these caveats, the fact that growth tends to be distribution neutral on average makes it unsurprising that the literature has also found that absolute poverty measures tend to fall with growth; see, for example, World Bank (1990, 2000), Ravallion (1995), Ravallion and Chen (1997), Fields (2001) and Kraay (2003). The elasticity of the “\$/day” poverty rate to growth in the survey mean is around  $-2$ , though somewhat lower (in absolute



value) if one measures growth rates from national accounts (Ravallion, 2001). The significant negative correlation between poverty reduction and growth in the mean from surveys is found to be robust to correcting for the likely correlation of measurement errors in the poverty measures and those in the mean, using growth rate in the national accounts as the instrumental variable (Ravallion, 2001). So it can be said that economic growth is typically “pro-poor growth,” by the second definition.

However, there is wide variation in the impact of a given rate of growth on poverty. The 95% confidence interval implies that a 2% annual growth rate in average household income will bring anything from a modest drop in the poverty rate of 1% to a more dramatic 7% annual decline (Ravallion, 2001). (So for a country with a headcount index of 40%, we have 95% confidence that the index will fall by somewhere between 0.4 percentage points and 2.8 points in the first year.) The elasticity tends to be higher (in absolute value) for higher-order poverty measures that reflect distribution below the poverty line. Thus the gains to the poor from growth are clearly not confined to people near the poverty line, but reach deeper.

Finding that growth tends to be distribution neutral on average does not, of course, mean that distribution is unchanging. Indeed, distributional changes have been an important factor empirically in explaining differing rates of poverty reduction at country level. Amongst growing economies, the median rate of decline in the “\$1/day” headcount index is 10% per year amongst countries that combined growth with falling inequality, while it is only 1% per year for those countries for which growth came with rising inequality (Ravallion, 2001). Either way poverty tends to fall, but at very different rates. (And similarly amongst contracting economies; poverty rises on average, but much more rapidly when inequality is rising than falling.) As one would

expect, changes in distribution matter even more for higher-order poverty measures, such as the Watts index, which can respond quite elastically to even small changes in overall inequality.

There has been a trend decline in the incidence of absolute poverty and the total number of poor over the bulk of the 1980s and 1990s. For example, the number of poor (by the \$1/day standard) fell by about 100 million in the 1990s, representing a decline of about 0.7 points per year (Chen and Ravallion, 2004). In the aggregate, if the rate of absolute poverty reduction experienced in the 1990s is maintained it will be sufficient to achieve the U.N.'s Millennium Development Goal of halving the 1990 \$1/day poverty rate by 2015. However, progress has been highly uneven and Sub-Saharan Africa, in particular, is not on track for meeting this goal. Growth in the most populous countries (China and India) has clearly been important to bringing down the global headcount of poverty. By the same token, lack of growth in some of the poorest countries has dampened overall progress.

The story on relative poverty is not so clear. By the Chen-Ravallion relative poverty measure, the incidence of relative poverty has been falling in the 1990s though with a rising number of relatively poor (Chen and Ravallion, 2001). Higher rates of growth would be needed to bring down relative poverty.

It is instructive to have a closer look at the growth process in the two most populous countries, China and India. Table 1 gives the ordinary rate of growth in mean household consumption per capita (measured from national sample surveys) for these two countries in the 1990s, and compares this to the rate of pro-poor growth, calculated as the mean growth rate of the poor at the beginning of the period.<sup>2</sup> In both cases there has been a distributional shift

---

<sup>2</sup> The results for India are clouded by a serious comparability problem between the consumption numbers reported by India's National Sample Survey Organization for 1993/94 and 1999/00; Datt and Ravallion (2002) review the issues. I have relied on reasonably comparable distributions constructed from these surveys by Sundaram and Tendulkar (2003a,b). See the note to Table 1 for details.

against the poor, such that the rate of pro-poor growth is appreciably lower than the ordinary rate of growth. (Coincidentally, the distributional correction needed to obtain the rate of pro-poor growth from the ordinary rate of growth is identical at 0.63.) Notice however that the rate of pro-poor growth is still positive in both cases — indicating that poverty is falling. Note also that the rate of pro-poor growth is almost five times higher in China.

Figure 1 gives the growth incidence curves for the two countries. For China, the growth rates tend to rise as we move up the distribution; the annual rate of growth in the 1990s varies from about 3% for the poorest percentile to nine percent for the richest. For India, there is a U shaped pattern, with the lowest growth rate around the third decile from the bottom. But also for India, the growth rate peaks at the high end of the distribution. However, no matter where one draws the poverty line, the rate of pro-poor growth is positive in both cases, and higher in China. Indeed, even the poorest percentile in China enjoyed a growth rate more than double that of the poorest percentile in India.

### **What makes growth more pro-poor?**

The rate of growth is clearly an important determinant of the rate of absolute poverty reduction. But why do we find that the same rate of growth can bring such different rates of poverty reduction? By probing more deeply into the causes of diverse impacts of growth on poverty, the literature has pointed to implications for the policies that are needed for rapid poverty reduction, in addition to promoting higher growth. Two sets of factors can be identified as the main proximate causes of the differing rates of poverty reduction at given rates of growth: the initial level of inequality and how inequality changes over time.

*Initial inequality.* While the evidence suggests that one cannot expect absolute poverty to fall without positive growth, the higher the initial inequality in a country (even if it does not

change), the less the gains from growth tend to be shared by the poor. In other words, a smaller initial share tends to mean a smaller subsequent share of the gains from aggregate economic expansion. Evidence for this interaction effect between initial inequality and growth has been found in cross-country comparisons of rates of poverty reduction (Ravallion, 1997, 2001; Kraay, 2003).

The argument works in reverse too; high inequality will help protect the poor from the adverse impact of aggregate economic contraction (Ravallion, 1997). Low inequality can thus be a mixed blessing for poor people living in an unstable macroeconomic environment; it helps them share in the benefits of growth, but it also exposes them to the costs of contraction.

A parsimonious empirical model of the relationship between poverty and growth says that the rate of poverty reduction (measured as the difference in the log of the measure of poverty) is directly proportional to the “distribution corrected rate of growth” where the latter is given by the ordinary rate of growth (log difference in mean consumption or income) times a distributional term. In Ravallion (1997) the distributional correction used is one minus the initial Gini index. This model can be improved (in terms of fit with data on actual spells of changes in poverty matched with growth) by using instead an adjustment for nonlinearity in the relationship between the growth elasticity of poverty and the initial inequality, giving a simple model of the expected rate of poverty reduction over any period:

$$\text{Rate of poverty reduction} = [\text{Constant} \times (1 - \text{Inequality index})^\theta] \times \text{Ordinary growth rate}$$

The constant term is negative and  $\theta$  is a parameter not less than one. The growth elasticity of poverty is the term in square brackets. At very high levels of inequality the poor will gain little or nothing from economic growth; at the extreme in which inequality is at its maximum (an inequality index of one) the richest person has all the income and so all the gains from growth

will go to that person. For values of  $\theta$  strictly greater than one, higher levels of initial inequality will have progressively smaller impacts on the elasticity as inequality rises.

Quite a good fit with data on actual rates of poverty reduction, as measured between household surveys, can be obtained using the initial Gini index as the measure of inequality and using  $\theta = 3$ .<sup>3</sup> By this simple model, the rate of poverty reduction in a given time period is directly proportional to  $(1-G)^3$  times the rate of growth over that period, where  $G$  is the Gini index at the beginning of the time period. Using a sample of estimates of the changes in the log of the “\$1/day” poverty rates for the longest available spells between successive surveys for 62 countries the constant of proportionality is  $-9.33$ , with a standard error of  $0.75$  and  $R^2 = 0.71$ .<sup>4</sup> Figure 2 plots the implied growth elasticity of poverty against the Gini index; the elasticity ranges from  $-4.3$  to  $-0.6$ .

To help interpret this model, consider the rate of poverty reduction with a 2% rate of growth in per capita income with no change in distribution and a headcount index of 40%. In a low-inequality country, with a Gini index of 0.30, say, the headcount index will fall by 6.4% per year, or 2.6 percentage points in the first year; the headcount index will be halved in 10.5 years. By contrast, in a high inequality country, with a Gini index of 0.60 growing at the same rate and with the same initial headcount index, the latter will fall at an annual rate of 1.2%, representing a decline of only 0.7 percentage points in the first year; it will then take 57 years to halve the initial

---

<sup>3</sup> The nonlinear least squares estimate of  $\theta$  on a sample of estimates of the changes in the log of the “\$1/day” poverty rates for the longest available spells between surveys for 62 countries gave 3.031 with a standard error of 0.491.

<sup>4</sup> If one simply regresses the rate of poverty reduction on the rate of growth (both as log differences) then one obtains  $R^2 = 0.56$ . Thus incorporating the nonlinear interaction effect with initial inequality adds 15 percentage points to the variance in rates of poverty reduction that can be explained by rates of growth. The “long spells” series was possible for 70 countries, but eight were dropped on the grounds that the measured rates of poverty reduction relative to rates of growth were either far too large or far too small to be believed (elasticities less than  $-10$  or greater than  $0.5$ ). On the full sample of 70 countries, I obtained  $R^2 = 0.46$  using the ordinary rate of growth versus  $0.58$  using the distribution corrected rate of growth, as above.

poverty rate. Poverty responds slowly to growth in high inequality countries; or (to put the same point slightly differently) high inequality countries will need unusually high growth rates to achieve rapid poverty reduction.

These are average expected impacts. Around the highest levels of inequality in the data set in Figure 2 (Gini indices over one half) the elasticity is not significantly different from zero. And if anything the standard error on which this test is based is probably over-estimated. If one corrects the standard error for the bias arising from the correlation between rates of growth and rates of poverty reduction (as generated by common sources of measurement error) then the number of high-inequality countries for which one cannot reject the null hypothesis that the poverty rate is unresponsive to growth rises.

None of this is inconsistent with the findings in the literature indicating that a large share of the variance in rates of poverty reduction can be attributed to differences in ordinary rates of growth (Ravallion, 1995; Ravallion and Chen, 1997; Fields, 2001; Kraay, 2003). In a recent contribution, Kraay (2003) presents Datt-Ravallion decompositions of changes in “\$1/day” poverty measures into growth and redistribution components for as many countries as possible (drawing on the World Bank’s Global Poverty Monitoring Data Base:

<http://www.worldbank.org/research/povmonitor/>). The growth component is the product of the growth rate and what can be termed a “partial elasticity of poverty to growth,” or “partial elasticity” for short.<sup>5</sup> Kraay finds that the variance in the growth component is largely attributable to the growth rate, rather than the partial elasticity or its covariance with growth. For example, he attributes 81% of the variance in the log absolute value of the growth component of

---

<sup>5</sup> It is a partial elasticity because it holds distribution constant; by contrast the “total elasticity” lets distribution vary consistently with the data; the elasticity in square brackets in the above equation is a total elasticity. The analytic elasticities of poverty measures discussed in Kakwani (1993) and Bourguignon (2001) are partial elasticities.

changes in the headcount index to the variance in the log absolute growth rate. (The share is slightly higher for other measures, such as the Watts index, and when one focuses on the longest available spells between surveys in the data.)

All this is perfectly consistent with finding that poverty is relatively unresponsive to growth in specific countries. Kraay's results are based on averages formed from cross-country comparisons. (A variance is an average too, namely the mean of the squared deviations from the ordinary mean.) For a developing country with average inequality and for which inequality does increase with growth, Kraay's results offer some support for his policy conclusion that for reducing poverty the main thing to worry about is achieving a higher rate of growth. However, that does not mean that growth is sufficient even when inequality is low. If growth in a low inequality country comes with a sufficient increase in inequality then it will by-pass the poor. And, as already noted, the empirical finding that growth is roughly distribution neutral on average is consistent with the fact that it increases roughly half the time during spells of growth (Ravallion, 2001). Policy effort to keep inequality low may then be crucial to pro-poor growth in many low-inequality countries.

Furthermore, as we have seen, for high inequality countries, growth will be quite a blunt instrument against poverty unless that growth comes with falling inequality. The heterogeneity in country circumstances is key here. Averages formed across countries can be quite uninformative about how best to achieve pro-poor growth in specific countries.

While initial inequality is an important proximate determinant of differing rates of poverty reduction at a given rate of growth, to help inform policy we need to probe more deeply into the relevant sources of inequality. There are inequalities in a number of dimensions that are likely to matter, including access to both private (human and physical) assets and public goods.

Inequalities in access to infrastructure and social services (health care and education) naturally make it harder for poor people to take up the opportunities afforded by aggregate economic growth.

Further research is needed on the specific factors influencing the growth elasticity of poverty. Some clues as to the role played by initial conditions have been found by comparing rates of poverty reduction across states of India, for which we can compile a long series of reasonably comparable survey data back to about 1960. The analyses of these data confirm that economic growth has tended to reduce poverty in India. Higher average farm yields, higher public spending on development, higher (urban and rural) non-farm output and lower inflation were all poverty reducing (Ravallion and Datt, 2002). However, the response of poverty to non-farm output growth in India has varied significantly between states. The differences reflected systematic differences in initial conditions. Low farm productivity, low rural living standards relative to urban areas and poor basic education all inhibited the prospects of the poor participating in growth of the non-farm sector. Rural and human resource development appear to be strongly synergistic with poverty reduction through an expanding non-farm economy.

*Changing income distribution.* A second factor influencing the rate of poverty reduction at a given rate of growth is changing income distribution. We have seen that what happens to inequality in growing economies can make a big difference to the rate of poverty reduction. What underlies the changes in distribution? There are clearly a great many country-specific idiosyncratic factors (such as changes in trade regime, tax reforms, welfare-policy reforms and changes in demographics). Generalizations across country experience are never easy, but one factor that is likely to matter in many developing countries is the geographic and sectoral pattern of growth. The marked concentrations of poor people in specific regions and/or sectors that one



finds in many countries points to the importance of the pattern of growth to overall poverty reduction. The extent to which growth favors the rural sector is often key to its impact on aggregate poverty. The geographic incidence of both rural and urban economic growth is often important as well. However, the extent to which the pattern of growth (rather than simply the overall growth rate) matters to the rate of poverty reduction is likely to vary from country-to-country, depending on (*inter alia*) how unbalanced the growth process has been in the past and (hence) how much difference one currently finds between sectors or regions in levels of poverty.

Higher growth in a number developing countries has come with widening regional disparities and often little or no growth in lagging poor areas. For example, non-farm economic growth in India has not occurred in the states where it would have the most impact on poverty nationally (Datt and Ravallion, 2002). This can be seen in Figure 3, which plots the non-agricultural growth rate by state (on the vertical axis) against the proportionate impact of non-agricultural growth in each state on the *national* poverty rate (the latter is given by the state's elasticity of poverty to growth weighted by its share in national poverty). For the geographic pattern of growth to be conducive to poverty reduction, one would see a negative relationship in this figure; states where poverty is more (negatively) responsive to growth would need to grow faster. But there is no sign of this. A more pro-poor geographic pattern of growth in India's non-agricultural economy in the 1990s would have required higher growth in states such as Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Orissa and Uttar Pradesh.

Agricultural growth has also lagged relative to the (primarily urban) non-farm economy. Here the geographic pattern of growth has not been the issue, but rather the problem has been too little aggregate growth in this key sector for the poor. As a result, the overall growth process in

India has tended to become less pro-poor over time. The same thing appears to have been happening in China.

Making growth more pro-poor requires a combination of more growth, a more pro-poor pattern of growth and success in reducing the antecedent inequalities that limit the prospects for poor people to share in the opportunities unleashed in a growing economy. The ideal combination will naturally vary with country circumstances. In some countries, attention can safely focus on the overall rate of growth to assure rapid poverty reduction; elsewhere, a broader approach will be called for. This begs the question as to whether there might be a trade-off between interventions to make growth more pro-poor and the rate of growth.

### **Is poverty an impediment to future growth?**

While poverty is more often seen as a consequence of low average income, there are reasons for thinking that there is a feedback effect whereby high initial inequality also impedes future growth.<sup>6</sup> In many developing countries, a plausible way this can happen stems from the existence of credit market failures, which mean that some people are unable to exploit growth-promoting opportunities for investment in (physical and human) capital. And it will tend to be the poor for whom these constraints are most likely to be binding. With declining marginal products of capital, the output loss from the market failure will be greater for the poor. So the higher the proportion of poor people there are in the economy the lower the rate of growth. Then poverty is self-perpetuating.

There are other ways in which high inequality can impede growth prospects. In the presence of capital market failures due to moral hazard, high inequality can dull incentives for

---

<sup>6</sup> There is now a sizeable theoretical literature on the various ways in which inequality can impede growth. Contributions include Galor and Zeira (1993), Banerjee and Newman (1993), Benabou (1996), Aghion et al., (1999) and Bardhan et al., (1999).

wealth accumulation. It has also been argued that high inequality can foster macroeconomic instability and impede efficiency-promoting reforms that require cooperation and trust.<sup>7</sup>

There is supportive evidence for the view that inequality is bad for growth from cross-country comparisons of growth rates, suggesting that countries with higher initial inequality experienced lower rates of growth controlling for other factors such as initial average income, openness to trade and the rate of inflation.<sup>8</sup> At the same time, there are also a number of concerns about the data and methods underlying these findings based on cross-country comparative analysis (Ravallion, 2001). Future research will hopefully throw more light on the magnitude of the efficiency costs of inequality.

Accepting that there is no aggregate trade off between mean income and inequality does not, however, mean that there are no trade-offs at the level of specific policies. Reducing inequality by adding further distortions to an economy will have ambiguous effects on growth and (hence) poverty reduction.

However, there are many things that governments can do to assure more pro-poor growth. A high priority must be given to public action that can help poor people acquire the skills and maintain the good health needed to participate in the growth process. Policies that help insure the poor can also help underpin their longer-term prospects of escaping poverty. Doing less damage is also a good idea. There are often biases against the poor in taxation and spending policies, such as in the allocation of infrastructure spending. Government policies in some countries also add to the risks and costs facing poor people in attempting to escape poverty, such as by migration to better off areas. Recognizing that it is typically the poor rather than the

---

<sup>7</sup> Aghion et al (1998) and Bardhan et al. (1999) review these and related arguments as to why high inequality can reduce aggregate output.

<sup>8</sup> See Persson and Tabellini (1994), Alesina and Rodrik (1994), Clarke (1995), Birdsall et al., (1995), Perotti (1996), Deininger and Squire (1998) and Easterly (2002).

rich who are locked out of profitable opportunities for self-advancement, well-designed direct public action against current poverty can also help promote growth and hence longer-term poverty reduction.

### **Conclusions**

The challenge for policy is to combine growth-promoting reforms with the right policies to assure that the poor can participate fully in the opportunities unleashed, and so contribute to that growth. Get the combination of policies right, both growth and poverty reduction can be rapid. Get it wrong, both may well be stalled. Future research can help meet this challenge by:

- Throwing light on the country-specific and sub-national factors that influence the distributional nature of aggregate growth;
- Identifying to what extent those factors are amenable to policy intervention;
- Quantifying the trade-offs between alternative policies for promoting pro-poor growth, embracing both redistributive social policies and alternative growth strategies.

## Appendix: Measuring pro-poor growth

The Watts index is arguably the single best measure of poverty, since it is the only index that satisfies all the properties of an ideal poverty measure, as identified in the theoretical literature (Zheng, 1993). What then is the measure of the rate of “pro-poor growth” corresponding to changes over time in the Watts index? It turns out that the answer is strikingly simple.

Ravallion and Chen (2003) propose using the mean growth rate of the poor. To see why this measure is of interest, note first that the Watts index at date  $t$  can be written in the form:

$$W_t = \int_0^{H_t} \log[z / y_t(p)] dp \quad (1)$$

where  $y_t(p)$  is the quantile function (obtained by inverting the cumulative distribution function  $p = F_t(x)$  at the  $p$ 'th quantile) and  $H_t = F_t(z)$  is the headcount index. It is readily verified that (1) can be written in the equivalent form:

$$W_t = \log(z / y_t^*) \quad (2)$$

where

$$\log y_t^* \equiv \int_0^{H_t} \log y_t(p) dp + (1 - H_t) \log z \quad (3)$$

is the mean of log censored incomes, where the censored income is  $\min[y_t(p), z]$ , i.e., actual income when this is below the poverty line and the poverty line itself otherwise. It is evident from (2) that  $y_t^*$  is a stable monotonic decreasing function of the actual value of the Watts index. In other words,  $y_t^*$  is an exact money metric of the Watts index.

The growth rate in  $y_t^*$  is the aggregate growth rate in the incomes of the poor. On differentiating (3) w.r.t. time we have:

$$\frac{d \log(y_t^*)}{dt} = -\frac{dW_t}{dt} = \int_0^{H_t} \frac{d \log y_t(p)}{dt} dp \quad (4)$$

This can be interpreted as the measure of the growth rate consistent with the Watts index for the level of poverty. The growth incidence curve is simply:

$$g_t(p) \equiv \frac{d \log y_t(p)}{dt} \text{ for } 0 \leq p \leq 1 \quad (5)$$

This traces out how the growth rate varies by percentile of the distribution ranked by  $y$ . Thus the change in the Watts index per unit time is simply the area under the growth incidence curve up to the head count index. When equation (4) is normalized by the headcount index one obtains the mean growth rate of the poor:

$$g_t^p \equiv \frac{1}{H_t} \int_0^{H_t} g_t(p) \quad (6)$$

Notice that when all income levels grow at the same rate (leaving distribution unchanged), equation (6) just gives the overall growth rate,  $\gamma_t$ . Notice also that the change in the Watts index when all income grow at the same rate is:

$$-\frac{dW_t^*}{dt} \equiv \gamma_t H_t \quad (7)$$

Thus one can also write the rate of pro-poor growth, as given by (6), in the equivalent form:

$$g_t^p \equiv \frac{dW_t}{dW_t^*} \gamma_t \quad (8)$$

Thus the rate of pro-poor growth is the ordinary growth rate in the mean scaled up or down by the ratio of the actual change in the Watts index to the change implied by distribution-neutral growth (Ravallion and Chen, 2003). If the Watts index falls more (less) than one would have expected if all incomes had grown at the same rate then the rate of pro-poor growth is greater than (less than) the ordinary rate of growth.

## References

- Aghion, Philippe, Caroli, Eva and Garcia-Penalosa, Cecilia (1999), 'Inequality and Economic Growth: The Perspectives of the New Growth Theories', *Journal of Economic Literature*, 37(4), 1615-1660.
- Alesina, Alberto and Rodrik, Dani (1994), 'Distributive Politics and Economic Growth', *Quarterly Journal of Economics*, 108, 465-90.
- Atkinson, Anthony B., (1987), "On the Measurement of Poverty," *Econometrica* 55: 749-764.
- Banerjee, Abhijit V., and Andrew F. Newman, (1993), 'Occupational Choice and the Process of Development,' *Journal of Political Economy* 101(2): 274-298.
- Bardhan, Pranab, Samuel Bowles and Herbert Ginitis (1999), 'Wealth Inequality, Wealth Constraints and Economic Performance,' in A.B. Atkinson and F. Bourguignon (eds) *Handbook of Income Distribution*, vol. I., Amsterdam: North-Holland.
- Baulch, Robert and Neil McCulloch (2000), 'Tracking pro-poor growth.' ID21 insights No. 31. Sussex: Institute of Development Studies
- Benabou, Roland (1996), 'Inequality and Growth', in Ben Bernanke and Julio Rotemberg (eds), *National Bureau of Economic Research Macroeconomics Annual*, Cambridge: MIT Press, pp.11-74.
- Birdsall, Nancy, Ross, D. and Sabot, R. (1995), 'Inequality and Growth Reconsidered: Lessons from East Asia', *World Bank Economic Review*, 9(3), 477-508.
- Bourguignon, Francois (2001), 'The Pace of Economic Growth and Poverty Reduction.' Paper presented at LACEA 2001 Conference.
- Chen, Shaohua and Ravallion, Martin (2001), 'How Did the World's Poorest Fare in the 1990s?', *Review of Income and Wealth*, 47, 283-300.
- \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_ (2004), 'International Poverty Measures for the Developing World, 1981-2001,' Development Research Group, World Bank.
- Clarke, George R.G., (1995), 'More Evidence on Income Distribution and Growth', *Journal of Development Economics*, 47, 403-428.
- Datt, Gaurav and Ravallion, Martin (1992), 'Growth and Redistribution Components of Changes in Poverty Measures: A Decomposition with Applications to Brazil and India in the 1980s', *Journal of Development Economics*, 38, 275-295.
- \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_ (2002), 'Has India's Post-Reform Economic Growth Left the

- Poor Behind', *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, 16(3), 89-108.
- Deaton, Angus (1997), *The Analysis of Household Surveys*, Johns Hopkins University Press for the World Bank.
- \_\_\_\_\_ (2004), 'Measuring Poverty in a Growing World (or Measuring Growth in a Poor World,' *Review of Economics and Statistics*, forthcoming.
- Deininger, Klaus and Squire, Lyn (1998), 'New Ways of Looking at Old Issues: Inequality and Growth', *Journal of Development Economics*, 57(2), 259-87.
- Dollar, David and Aart Kraay, (2002), 'Growth is Good for the Poor,' *Journal of Economic Growth*, 7(3): 195-225.
- Easterly, William (2002), 'Inequality does Cause Underdevelopment: New Evidence,' Working Paper 1, Center for Global Development, Washington DC.
- Fields, Gary S., (2001), *Distribution and Development*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation.
- Galor, Oded and Joseph Zeira (1993), 'Income Distribution and Macroeconomics,' *Review of Economic Studies* 60(1), 35-52.
- Kakwani, Nanak (1993), 'Poverty and Economic Growth with Application to Côte D'Ivoire,' *Review of Income and Wealth*, 39, 121-139.
- Kakwani, Nanak and E. Pernia, (2000), 'What Is Pro-Poor Growth?' *Asian Development Review*. 18(1): 1-16.
- Kraay, Aart (2003), 'When is Growth Pro-Poor? Evidence from a Panel of Countries,' mimeo, Development Research Group, World Bank.
- Perotti, Roberto (1996), 'Growth, Income Distribution and Democracy: What the Data Say,' *Journal of Economic Growth*, 1(2), 149-87.
- Persson, Torsten and Tabellini, Guido (1994), 'Is Inequality Harmful for Growth?,' *American Economic Review*, 84, 600-621.
- Ravallion, Martin (1995), 'Growth and Poverty: Evidence for Developing Countries in the 1980s', *Economics Letters*, 48, 411-417.
- \_\_\_\_\_ (1997), 'Can High Inequality Developing Countries Escape Absolute Poverty?', *Economics Letters*, 56, 51-57.
- \_\_\_\_\_ (2001), 'Growth, Inequality and Poverty: Looking Beyond Averages', *World Development*, 29(11), 1803-1815.



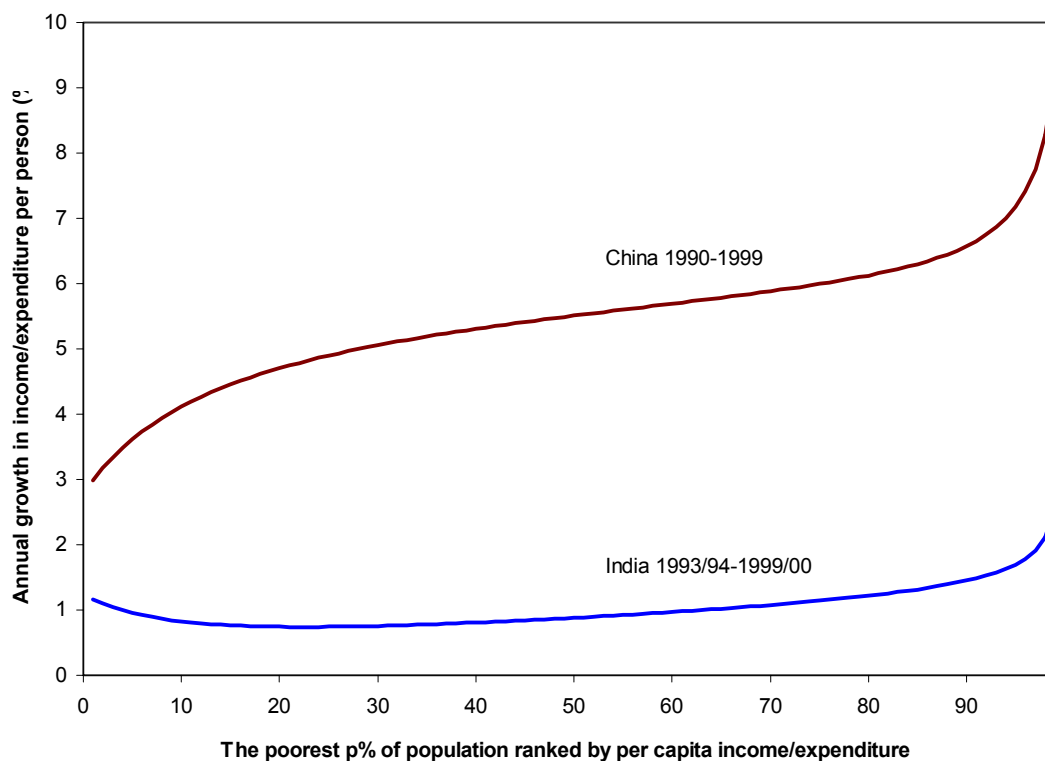
- \_\_\_\_\_ (2003a), 'Measuring Aggregate Welfare in Developing Countries: How Well do National Accounts and Surveys Agree?,' *Review of Economics and Statistics*, 85, 645-652.
- \_\_\_\_\_ (2003b), 'The Debate on Globalization, Poverty and Inequality: Why Measurement Matters', *International Affairs*, 79(4), 739-754.
- Ravallion, Martin and Chen, Shaohua (1997), 'What Can New Survey Data Tell Us about Recent Changes in Distribution and Poverty?,' *World Bank Economic Review*, 11(2), 357-82.
- \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_ (2003), 'Measuring Pro-Poor Growth,' *Economics Letters*, 78(1), 93-99.
- Ravallion, Martin and Datt, Gaurav (2002), 'Why Has Economic Growth Been More Pro-Poor in Some States of India than Others?,' *Journal of Development Economics*, 68, 381-400.
- Slesnick, Daniel T. (1998), 'Empirical Approaches to the Measurement of Welfare,' *Journal of Economic Literature*, 36(4), 2108-65.
- Sundaram, K., and Suresh D. Tendulkar (2003a), 'Poverty in India in the 1990s: An Analysis of Changes in 15 Major States,' *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 38 (August 2), 1385-93.
- \_\_\_\_\_, and \_\_\_\_\_ (2003b), 'Poverty in India in the 1990s: Revised Results for All-India and 15 Major States for 1993-94,' *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 38 (November 15), pp. 4865-73.
- Watts, Harold W. (1968), 'An Economic Definition of Poverty,' in Daniel P. Moynihan (ed.), *On Understanding Poverty*, New York, Basic Books.
- World Bank (1990), *World Development Report: Poverty*, New York: Oxford University Press.
- World Bank (2000), *World Development Report: Attacking Poverty*, New York: Oxford University Press.
- Zheng, Buhong, (1993), 'An Axiomatic Characterization of the Watts Index,' *Economics Letters*, 42, 81-86.

**Table 1: Ordinary rates of growth and rate of pro-poor growth in China and India**

Growth rates (% per annum)	India 1993/94-1999/00	China 1990-1999
Ordinary growth rate	1.3	6.2
Rate of pro-poor growth	0.8	3.9
Distributional effect	0.63	0.63

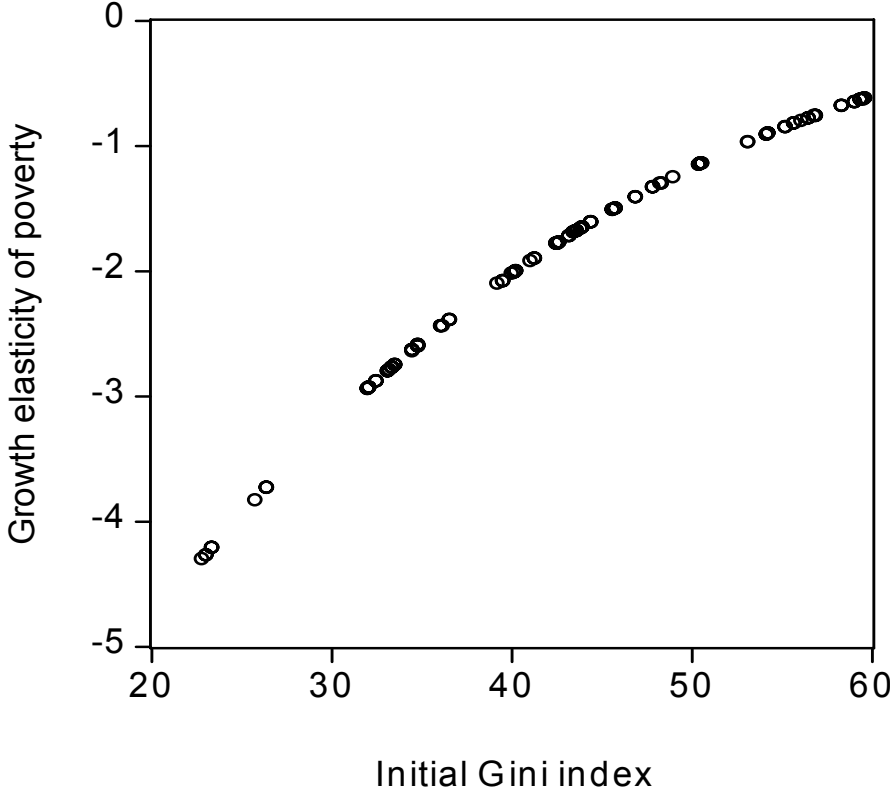
Note: Based on a headcount index of 40% for India and 15% for China. The China estimates are for household income per person and are from Ravallion and Chen (2003). The India estimates use comparable distributions of consumption per person based on a common “mixed reference period” for categories of consumption as obtained by Sundaram and Tendulkar (2003b). (These correct a mistake in the 1993/94 distributions as reported in Sundaram and Tendulkar, 2003a.) Rural and urban distributions are aggregated assuming urban-rural cost-of-living differentials of 33% and 38% for 1993/94 and 1999/00 respectively; these are based on updated poverty lines as used in Ravallion and Datt (2002).

**Figure 1: Growth incidence curves for China and India in the 1990s**



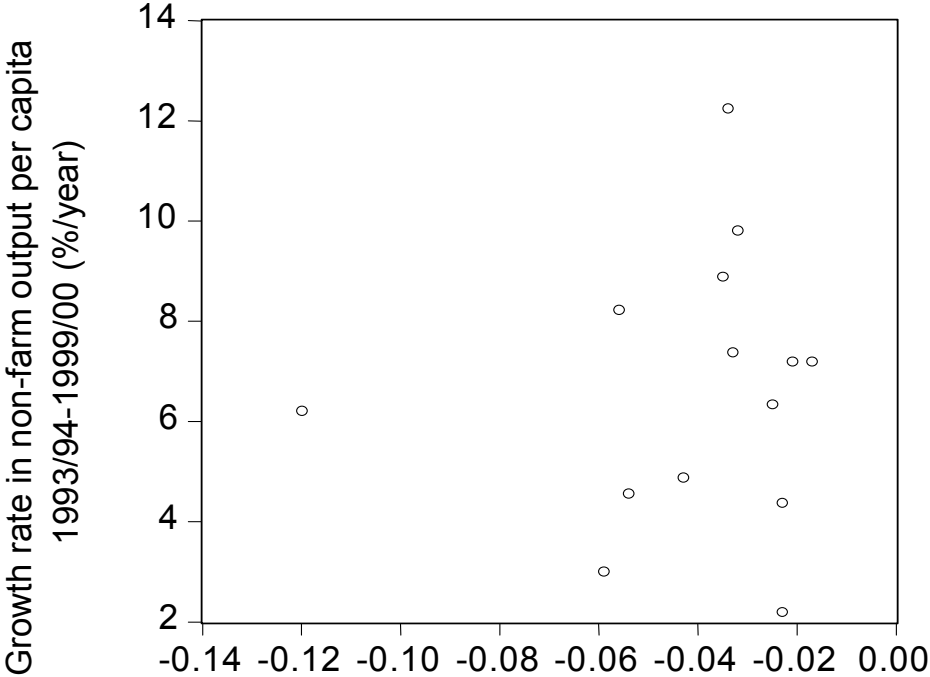
Note: See Table 1 on sources.

Figure 2: Growth elasticity of poverty as a function of the initial Gini index



Note: Authors calculations (see text)

**Figure 3: Non-agricultural economic growth in India in the 1990s has not been happening in the states where it would have had the most impact on poverty nationally**



**Impact on national poverty of non-farm output growth by state (Share-weighted elasticity for 1993/94)**

Note: Based on Datt and Ravallion (2002).