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PART V

Conclusions

23

Minimum income standards and reference budgets: past, present, future?

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Introduction

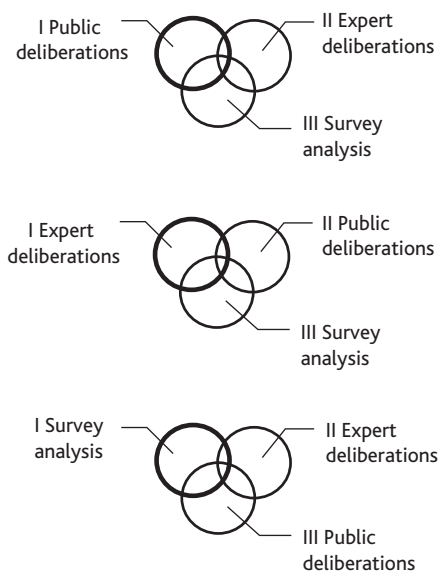
The contributions to this volume help to illustrate the enduring relevance and value of reference budget research. Few can doubt or challenge this 'common sense' approach for establishing adequacy benchmarks, and minimum income standards that can help guide the development of national, regional and global social policy. Not having enough money for living in society is our overriding concern. The overall minimum budget, when priced, should attempt to support a specified standard of living. Commodities are translated through prices into budgets. The fewer goods and services that are provided publicly, the more important individual or family income becomes in the reference budget equation. As we have seen throughout the volume, key questions still need to be addressed and answered in the research process, for example: What are the 'needs' and 'necessities', which commodities or items are required to satisfy them? Where can or should these items be purchased and how much are they likely to cost? How long will they last? And what does all this add up to in terms of a weekly budget to purchase the basket of goods and services? As the contributions to this volume make clear, there are many different ways to answer these questions. The answers do depend in part on who is defining the standards, for whom and how they are doing this methodologically speaking.

Methodological approaches and frameworks

While there is much diversity in the field, and this volume is testimony to that, nevertheless it is also clear that there are longstanding methodological approaches, capturing and reflecting three different

forms of input – experiential, normative and behavioural – that are often combined in various ways in order to define or benchmark income adequacy (Deeming, 2005, 2010a, 2011a, 2017). Broadly speaking they are either: (1) public-*led*, involving deliberative forums and citizens involved in focus group discussions; (2) expert-*led*, based on research evidence and knowledge relating to the promotion of human needs, good health and well-being, with experts doing much of the deliberating; or (3) survey-*led*, with social scientists analysing consumption and expenditure patterns observed empirically within social surveys. Of course many research studies cut across these approaches, often employing iterative processes, as we have seen. Nevertheless, there are often different points of departure, and more weight or emphasis is given to particular elements or inputs in the final results, in terms of public views, expert views or survey data, as illustrated in Figure 23.1.

Figure 23.1: Minimum income standards and reference budget methodologies



Note: Sequential steps, with the weight of the circle indicating the importance of the key element in the final reference budget standard and basket of goods.

Source: Adapted from Deeming (2005: 628, 2011a: 23, 2017: 36).

Given the different points of departure and weightings implied, the studies discussed in this volume may be considered or perhaps classified under one of our three headings as follows:

(1) *Public-led approaches and experiential social standards*, involve deliberative forums and citizens involved in focused group discussions. The 'consensual' approach includes all of the Minimum Income Standards (MIS)-inspired research studies reviewed here, now being conducted in many countries and regions of the globe, notably in the UK (Chapter 2) and Minimum Essential Standard of Living (MESL) in Ireland (Chapter 3), MIS in France (Chapter 4), Japan (Chapter 5), Singapore (Chapter 6) and South Africa (Chapter 7), and the consensual approach to reference budgets based on focus group research in Finland, discussed in Chapter 8.

(2) *Expert-led approaches and normative standards*, based on international guidelines and recommendations by expert bodies, encompassing research and scientific knowledge about health determinants, often involving expert deliberations. Notable here are the research studies discussed in the Belgian context (Chapter 9), Australia (Chapter 10), the region of Catalonia in Spain (Chapter 11), Slovenia (Chapter 16) and the ImPRovE cross-national reference budgets discussed in Chapter 18. The US also has a long tradition of normative 'basic needs' budgets, as we saw in Chapter 20.

(3) *Survey-led approaches and behavioural-based standards*, with social scientists analysing national social surveys, poverty surveys, family consumption and expenditure surveys, along with the consumer agency budget calculations. These research programmes were found to be particularly strong in the Netherlands (Chapter 12), Norway (Chapter 13), Denmark (Chapter 14) and Sweden (Chapter 15).

Most attempts to establish reference budgets in this volume are, in one form or another, based on deliberative processes, involving both experts and the public. We find that few reference budget studies are now solely based on expert judgements or survey results alone. Survey data on actual family spending patterns introduce circularity in budget research, and cannot be relied upon to set adequacy standards. Researchers avoid consumer expenditure survey data as much as possible, because choice is shown to be constrained by income, taste or habit, and by the social structures and class positions found in society (as Pierre Bourdieu observed in *La Distinction*: Deeming, 2014; Atkinson and Deeming,

2015). Few studies if any are now solely based on public consensus alone either. Many studies now try to combine or blend elements of all three perspectives, as the different budget research strategies in Figure 23.1 illustrate. Of course, they usually have their different starting points and their different perspectives, challenges, advantages and disadvantages. Table 23.1 summarises the key characteristics of each

Table 23.1: Methods, principles and policy perspectives summarised and compared

	Public-led	**Expert-led**	**Survey-led**
Who is 'expert'	Citizens/public	Scientist/social scientist	Social scientist
Key values/ emphasis	Social inclusion	Human needs	Social inclusion
Standards	Experiential standards, public consensus, social standards	Normative, scientific knowledge and consensus, basic needs standards	Behavioural standards, statistical consensus
Validity	Participatory or deliberative democratic, situated in public understandings and the reported experience of citizens	Scientific, situated in knowledge and understanding of human needs	Scientific, situated in knowledge and understanding of social necessity
Reliability	Low, measure is not designed to be consistent out of the local context in which it was generated	High, measure is likely to be consistent across populations but may change across time (with new knowledge)	High, measure is likely to be consistent and comparable across populations and time
Generalisability	Aims to produce relative standards grounded in local and national contexts, methods are generalisable but standards from one context should not be imposed on another	Aims to produce highly generalisable standards across country contexts, strength in cross-national comparability	Aims to produce relative but highly generalisable cross-national comparative standards
Strengths	Monitoring and shaping national and regional minimum income protection floors	Measuring, monitoring and ensuring a consistent minimum income protection floor across nations and regions	Measuring and monitoring living standards and inequality levels across time and place

Source: Adapted from Deeming (2017: 43).

approach according to method, principles and the policy perspectives being adopted and promoted here.

In recent years, there has been a discernible trend in the field towards a much stronger emphasis on public deliberations to make value judgements. In other words, we now rely more heavily on the input of citizens, and give less weight to the views of experts and survey data in the calculations. This reflects a shift more generally, away from 'top-down' solutions to try and solve social problems – in budget research, as we have seen, and in social policy more generally (Beresford, 2016), with growing innovations in deliberation research (Burchardt, 2014) and democratic forums (Taylor-Gooby et al, 2019). From this perspective, members of the public – 'ordinary people' – are the best judges of their own needs and can arrive at collective positions on key questions in social science.[1]

Many of the research studies discussed here also draw on established theoretical and international human rights frameworks. The frameworks are used to guide the research development process and justify social standards, for example:

- The human needs frameworks, dating back to the 1970s, embodied in the work of Len Doyal and Ian Gough, and Manfred Max-Neef.
- The capability approach to fundamental entitlements, associated with Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum.
- The relative theories of need and necessity embodied in the works of Peter Townsend, Robert Walker and John Veit-Wilson.
- The international agreements and human rights frameworks associated with the UN, the right to social security (Article 22) and, the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being (Article 25).[2]

At the risk of oversimplification, the public consensus approach to setting social standards associated with the MIS and other consensual budget studies, tends to appeal to the 'relative' living standards theory frameworks, while the expert-normative approach tends to appeal to the 'absoluteness' of human health needs and capability frameworks. The discussions by Bérénice Storms in Chapter 9 and Matt Padley and Abigail Davis in Chapter 17 are particularly relevant and capture those debates, while the extensive work of José A. Pereirinha and colleagues in Chapter 19 explores working with the different approaches in practice, and critically compares findings from different perspectives.

Common challenges and future directions

Finally, the contributions to this volume reveal the familiar issues faced by researchers in the field, to do with cultural relativity, language and contested key concepts (Lister, 2004); terms like 'poverty', 'adequacy', 'minimum', 'healthy', 'well-being', 'social', 'reasonable', 'acceptability' and 'participation', and how they are employed by researchers in different contexts. There are also the longstanding and much discussed technical challenges faced in this field such as pricing a basket of items and estimating their lifetimes. All of these issues are discussed extensively throughout the volume, however Gemma Wright and colleagues in Chapter 7, Peter Saunders in Chapter 10, Matt Padley and Abigail Davis in Chapter 17 and Tim Goedemé in Chapter 18 examine them in detail. It is not necessary to rehearse all of the arguments again, as these chapters elaborate them very well. Clearly researchers always need to take care with concepts and be explicit about their approach, whether 'poverty' measurement, as illustrated in the work J. Cok Vrooman and colleagues in Chapter 12 for example, or 'social acceptability', employed in the MIS studies (see Chapters 2–7).

Going forward, it seems that methodological pluralism should probably prevail at this stage: there can be no 'one size fits all', and this is particularly true across diverse contexts, as we discover in a number of chapters (see Chapters 7, 17 and 18). There is strength in the combined methods and approaches reviewed here, illustrated in Figure 23.1, as they are often being employed for different policy purposes. Moreover, the field continues to develop at some pace with shared learning and new international collaborations. There will always be new opportunities on the horizon with improved access to information, methodological and data improvements and better applications, as Peter Saunders reminds us in Chapter 10. Researchers should therefore think carefully about the context and purpose of their inquiry when planning any study. For example, it is hard to object to a 'needs'-based formulation for thinking about minimum and social living standards generally, across low-, middle- and high-income settings, particularly where we are interested in developing consistent and comparable cross-national standards to promote health and social welfare for all. Needs-based standards alone, however, may be too restrictive in some contexts where citizens enjoy a high social standard of living, and where research emphasising consensual methods and social standards may be more preferable.

Arguably the field of reference budget research has suffered from a general lack of collaboration until relatively recently. Today, the

international and cross-national research efforts, MIS and ImPRovE, offer a positive step forward for shared learning, strengthening research capacity and more coordinated policy campaigning work, as the work of Matt Padley and Abigail Davis (Chapter 17) and Tim Goedemé (Chapter 18) clearly shows. Sometimes we gain new insights from the different collaborations too. José A. Pereirinha and colleagues' (Chapter 19) involvement with both the MIS and ImPRovE projects in Portugal helps to shed new light on the different methodological procedures and outcomes employed across the different projects. They also pose new issues and questions to be answered with further experimentation, across a range of budgets, not just for food.

Greater experimentation and triangulation against other sources of data, information and comparable indicators can help demonstrate the validity and reliability of budget standards, rather than protracted arguments about the precision of any one set of empirical findings. For example, it is possible to operationalise adequacy of income in a 'lived sense' by looking at the household income or expenditure levels in social surveys, at which healthy living standards are in fact *achieved*, i.e. the 'managing in practice' or the 'semi-normative' budget standard (see UN Expert Group on Poverty Statistics, Rio Group, 2006). Some of my own research with Peter Townsend focused on such issues, as Townsend had proposed this approach for establishing minimum income standards back in the 1950s and 1960s but the surveys of the time were thoroughly inadequate for the job (Deeming, 2009, 2010b, 2011b, 2011c).[3] Since it is now perfectly possible to demonstrate empirically the individual or household income levels at which social, material and health deprivations and inequalities are best avoided, this sort of triangulation with the findings from the reference budget and MIS studies can be considered good practice, as John Veit-Wilson (2011) observes. This is already happening, but should be encouraged. Recent research in the UK, for example, finds households below 75 per cent of MIS have four times the odds of lacking necessities compared to those with incomes above MIS (Hirsch et al, 2016), while the odds of frailty in older age for people with incomes below the Minimum Income for Healthy Living (MIHL) were 2–3 times higher compared to those with incomes above MIHL (Watts et al, 2019).

Drawing together some of the lessons from the across the research reported in this volume, we can begin to suggest tentative 'good practice' principles to help guide future research in this field, which may be summarised as follows:

- Ensure the study has a clear definition of the relevant standards, concepts, frameworks and the units of measurement.
- Ensure the study is based on good quality research, and that data and information are clearly reported to ensure high levels of validity, reliability and replicability.
- Ensure the approach has been applied more than once, ideally in different contexts. Research collaborations can help, and make sure efforts are made to triangulate findings from different sources. Standards should be accompanied by other forms of evidence to help more definitive conclusions to be drawn.
- Ensure the research produces information that can contribute to or be used as an input in social policy development and practice; research collaborations and partnerships with stakeholders can help promote knowledge exchange activities and impact generation.

Finally, the research data being generated in this field are not generally made available for reanalysis, particularly the data gathered from the focused interviews and deliberative research. Ideally it should be, as data archiving is now considered good practice. Secondary analysis will help further the cross-national and collaborative research effort. Social research demands high ethical standards: citizens and members the public are involved in our research and public funds often support it. More generally, data should be made available for further rigorous scrutiny, particularly if researchers are demanding that policy makers act upon their findings, as they often do.

Tools for advancing social policy?

Reference budget standards are an important tool for the development of social policy that can help guide political thinking and structure public debate. The findings from reference budget research can and do continue to provide reliable benchmarks – evidence to guide the development of social policy – as many of the contributors here suggest, particularly in relation to national living wage campaigns, as Donald Hirsch observes (Chapter 21), as well as applications in local welfare provision, taken up by Bérénice Storms in Chapter 9. Then there is the cross-national reference budget research effort in Europe led by Tim Goedemé and colleagues (Chapter 18), which has been designed to influence those debates at EU and national levels. Findings from the MIS and reference budget studies, as we saw, are also being drawn into other areas of the social policy debate around basic income, for example (Chapter 22). Further work within and across national

contexts is a growing priority for people with disabilities (VPSJ, 2017; Hill et al, 2018), as are the needs of women and children (Bennett and Daly, 2014; VPSJ, 2018) and the needs of those living in more remote rural areas (Mac Mahon et al, 2010; Hirsch et al, 2013). Then there is the growing research imperative to construct new lines or standards indicating excess affluence: at present the focus has been on the minimum, but we also need to know the maximum that society is willing to tolerate among its members (Concialdi, 2018).

In an era of growing social inequality, extreme poverty, climate and environmental change, a world facing up to resource constraints and planetary boundaries, global social justice and sustainability concerns come to the fore, embodied in the Sustainable Development Goals agreed by the UN in 2015, for example (Jackson and Webster, 2018; Stern, 2019). The urgent need for minimum income protection on a global scale is now well recognised in the work of international organisations involved in global social governance, such as the International Labour Organization (ILO) and the World Health Organisation (WHO), see ILO/WHO (2011) and Deacon (2013) for a review. The WHO appeals to social policy researchers and public health specialists around the globe to pursue reference budgets and minimum income standards research in order to help set minimum social standards, and they have called upon national and regional governments to act in order to strengthen minimum wages and social protection systems, including the benefits, pensions and tax credit systems that can provide pathways for promoting health and social inclusion if they are carefully designed (CSDH, 2008; Glennerster et al, 2009; Marmot Review, 2010; Lundberg et al, 2012). Clearly much more budgetary research needs to be done in this respect, and especially in low- and middle-income settings where the 'dollar-a-day' measure has overshadowed policy debates over many decades (Deeming and Gubhaju, 2015; Klasen et al, 2016; Atkinson, 2019).[4] Despite some of the significant challenges ahead, the future of reference budget and minimum income standards research now seems to be on a firm footing internationally, and if this new volume in some ways helps to raise the profile, promote understanding and impact – then our collective efforts will have paid off.

Notes

[1] If ordinary people can be trusted to think about what a just minimum level might be, perhaps they can also have an input into the trade-offs that may be implied? If a minimum social security standard of x increased taxes by y, or reduced the NHS budget by z, would you still support it? This would imply more public deliberations in areas of governmental decision making, considering that policy priorities for welfare and wellbeing often involve such trade-offs. Hypothecation,

weighting approaches and conjoint analysis are techniques that can also be used to help elicit public preferences for policy development purposes (O'Donnell and Oswald, 2015; Stadelmann-Steffen and Dermont, n.d.).

[2] UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR): https://www.un.org/en/universal-declaration-human-rights/, and the core instruments: https://www.ohchr.org/EN/ProfessionalInterest/Pages/CoreInstruments.aspx.

[3] Peter Townsend had originally suggested that a semi-normative approach 'would give the fairest index of poverty' in the 1950s and 1960s, following earlier recommendations by Dr Barnet Woolf and Sir John Boyd Orr, and more recently Reddy and Pogge (2005) have argued in favour of setting income poverty thresholds where good health can demonstrably be achieved in the global assessment of poverty.

[4] Now raised to $1.90 a day (adjusted for purchasing power), the World Bank Group remains committed to achieving the goal of ending extreme poverty by 2030. Living on less than $3.20 per day reflects poverty lines in lower-middle-income countries.

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