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Virtues and *limitations of census* maps for identifying *critical deficiencies*

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Critical deficiency maps, conceived as objective, uniformly applicable technical tools that could be employed to make social expenditure more efficient and effective, constitute the most ambitious and successful method devised to date for using census data for social planning in Latin America and the Caribbean. Nevertheless, while their importance and potential as a policy tool have gained increasing recognition, questions have arisen concerning their virtues and limitations and on how they could be made to serve the need for more complex social information or to reveal the changing forms that poverty assumes. This article addresses five of the questions most frequently posed about the maps: How accurately do they identify or exclude beneficiaries of anti-poverty programmes? How well do they handle comparisons over time? How well do they handle spatial comparisons? How easily can they incorporate updated information? And how appropriate are the research variables chosen?

I

Introduction

Maps identifying critical deficiencies¹ have been seen as objective, uniformly applicable technical tools that could be used to make social expenditure more efficient and effective. They are created by estimating the ratio of households with critical deficiencies to total households in a given locality or settlement stratum. They help to identify the most serious deficiencies in a given geographical area and to analyse the socio-demographic profile of households with deficiencies, comparing it to the profile of other households.

Critical deficiency maps, in my opinion, constitute the most ambitious and successful method devised to date of using census information for purposes of social planning. Their usefulness becomes obvious when one considers how hard it is to expand census research beyond the purposes for which censuses were originally designed. The simultaneous collection, processing and distribution of reliable information on the entire population of a country requires an organization that can control the specifics of each step in the census process. The cost and complexity of the operation discourages offices of statistics from including questions beyond the minimum necessary to take a periodic "x-ray" of the socio-demographic situation. Despite these limitations, now that widespread recognition of the usefulness of maps of unmet basic needs as guides to social policy has enhanced the prestige of the work of national offices of statistics, the officials in charge have shown themselves to be more willing to add or modify questions in order to improve research into the extent, location and characteristics of households with critical deficiencies, without undermining the original purposes of the census.

In Latin American countries that have employed this method, the results published have shown the great potential of the census as a source of information in the fight against poverty, have increased public awareness of the issue and have stimulated a national debate on the appropriateness of poverty in-

dicators. The overall effect has been beneficial; it has encouraged the use of a uniform set of definitions and indicators by all agencies responsible for social action, cut down on duplication of efforts and created the conditions for integrating information and coordinating initiatives directed towards the poor.

The importance of the latter achievement has not been sufficiently emphasized, in my opinion. In recent years, those who deal with the issue of poverty from various angles have observed an increasing rapprochement among professionals involved in the tasks that mediate between theory and social action—the thinkers who define and operationalize the problem, the data producers who compile and process data, the computer experts who develop or adapt georeferential technologies,² the data analysts, and the programme designers, decision-makers, implementers and evaluators. This tendency has generated a positive synergy, in which efforts to make social expenditure more cost-effective have reinforced and been reinforced by more cost-effective investment in methods and techniques and by continual conceptual refinement. Because they are simple, attractive and readily understandable formats for presenting diagnostic analyses, critical deficiency maps have become a key link in the chain between theory and action in the fight against poverty.

On the part of users, recognition of the importance and potential of the census-based maps for identifying critical deficiencies has raised questions about their virtues and limitations and about the degree to which they could be made to serve the need for more complex social information or to reveal the changing forms that poverty assumes. In this article, I will address five of the questions most frequently posed about the maps: How accurately do they identify or exclude beneficiaries of anti-poverty programmes? How well do they handle comparisons over time? How well do they handle spatial comparisons? How easily can they incorporate updated information? And how appropriate are the research variables chosen?

¹ In this article, the terms "critical deficiencies" and "unmet basic needs" are used interchangeably.

² That is, technologies that allow for rapid location—and profile analysis—of small geographic units that meet previously defined criteria.

II

Problems relating to inclusion and exclusion of categories of the poor on critical deficiency maps

In order to provide an answer to the question of how accurately the maps include or exclude categories of the poor, it will be helpful to do a quick review of the criteria applied in formulating indicators of unmet basic needs. There are essentially five.

The first criterion, which we may call "geographic grouping", aims at locating households with critical deficiencies and analysing them with the most detailed geographical breakdown possible. The only means of collecting data with the coverage required for this purpose is a population census. The choice of a census as a data source in turn places definite limits on the choice of indicators.

The second criterion is representativeness. Given the above-mentioned limitations, in order to ensure that the characteristics selected are representative of an inability to meet an array of needs broader than that covered by the census, the indicators constructed must show a statistically significant correlation with the household income level that defines the poverty line.

The third criterion is universality. This means that access to the goods or services that meet what are considered basic needs must be a reasonably feasible option for all households within the territory of the country. A need is considered "unmet" only when it implies acute deprivation and "met" if there is any doubt about the critical nature of the deficiency or if the indicators tend to reflect heterogeneous situations in different geographic areas.

The fourth criterion is stability. Preference is given to indicators that are less sensitive to economic cycles and hence reflect relatively stable characteristics of households.

The final criterion is simplicity. Whenever a choice must be made between two or more equally valid methods of measuring a critical deficiency, the simplest, most readily understood indicator will be chosen.

Indicators constructed on the basis of the above criteria minimize the risk of including households of low social vulnerability in the category of households

with deficiencies. The detailed level of breakdown possible using census data, coupled with increasing access to blocks of data with methodologies that make it possible to work with small localities that are highly homogeneous with respect to the deficiencies suffered by the households comprised, makes the maps thus prepared very useful for targeting social policy programmes.

With respect to their limitations, it is true that the chosen indicators do not make it possible to locate and analyse households that could be considered "new poor" after experiencing recent downward mobility and that therefore still have the educational levels, school attendance standards for their children and housing infrastructure characteristic of their former situation. This is undoubtedly a major drawback given the present circumstances in many Latin American countries; new poverty is emerging from the processes of restructuring and adjustment common throughout the region, and its significance with respect to changes in the social structure has not yet been properly diagnosed, much less thoroughly evaluated in terms of its socio-political consequences. What is already clear is that in the immediate future we will have to prepare ourselves to estimate the numbers of the new poor, identify their characteristics and produce information useful in designing and implementing policies to reduce their vulnerability and prevent the activation of mechanisms that could lead to marginalization and chronic poverty.

Another drawback is that the maps identify geographic aggregates. This leads to at least two distortions. The first is that a certain amount of resources find their way to non-poor households, which, by virtue of residing in communities with high concentrations of poverty, enhance their likelihood of benefiting from the goods or services resulting from the new policies. Second, households that are part of the population targeted by the programmes but live in localities with low poverty densities are not reached

by policies designed on a territorial basis. This means that the effectiveness of the maps as sources of information for anti-poverty policies is closely linked to the degree of spatial concentration of households with critical deficiencies and the homogeneity of

their profiles. Nevertheless, the maps are usually quite efficient, because the cost of the resources diverted is usually lower than the cost of the administrative resources that would have to be mobilized in order to narrow the field (ECLAC, 1995b, pp. 13-25).³

III

Comparability over time

1. General considerations

Although critical deficiency maps were not designed for the purpose, most users draw inferences about trends in critical deficiencies when they have information for two or more points in time. Some sorts of inferences can be drawn, while others cannot. The data have been found useful in identifying advances and setbacks with respect to each indicator considered separately. With the support of some additional information, advances or setbacks can also be interpreted in part as being due to the success or failure of different programmes. When making such an interpretation, however, caution is in order. An improvement in some indicators (e.g., overcrowding, subsistence capacity and school attendance) may be due less to specific programmes on housing, education, or aid to large families than to phenomena such as declining fertility or increasing employment, which are determined by other factors.

Even greater caution should be exercised when, instead of monitoring separate indicator trends, the aim is to seek a general interpretation of changes in the percentage of households or individuals whose basic needs are unmet. First of all, such changes cannot be interpreted simply as a change in the extent of poverty. It has already been pointed out that the current indicators of unmet basic needs do not detect the existence of the new poor, and, as we shall see, given the way the indicators are constructed, it is quite likely that they also underestimate chronic urban poverty. As a result, even though the original rationale for the maps was a desire for information on situations affecting high-risk groups, the fact that the general index of unmet basic needs measures only some of those groups means that time comparisons do not provide a basis for judging whether poverty on a whole is increasing or declining.

Secondly, it should be borne in mind that the degree to which census indicators of basic needs correlate with other dimensions of poverty varies over time, an important consideration when one is working with census data collected at periods at least ten years apart in countries undergoing rapid socio-economic changes. If we compare this situation with the methodology employed to estimate poverty lines, we find that the latter takes into account temporal relativity. It is implicit, for example, in the periodic update of the list of products included in the basic shopping basket, to reflect changes in food habits, average weight and height, proportion of the population engaged in activities requiring various levels of energy consumption and hence of caloric intake, and changes in the weighting of food products in total consumption. The underlying notion is that the basic shopping basket as re-defined should reflect cultural changes in the ways that basic needs are satisfied and, ultimately, changes in threshold levels of what is considered a decent standard of living. Theoretically, the methodology for constructing indicators of unmet basic needs also allows for periodic updates of the indicators through their individual correlation with the level of household income that defines the poverty line and through consultation with specialists in the various dimensions of basic needs. In practice, however, when comparisons over time have been made, to my knowledge, the indicators applied have not been modified from their original version.

To illustrate the importance of modifying the indicators of unmet basic needs for a valid time comparison, let us consider subsistence capacity. This indicator is designed to identify households with a low potential capacity to earn the income needed to provide adequate subsistence to all of their members.

³ On the factors that determine the relevance of territory in allocating resources, see ECLAC, 1995a, p. 7.

To measure that capacity, it classifies as households with critical deficiencies households headed by persons with a level of education so low that it constitutes a clear disadvantage in a job market of ever-increasing skill requirements, along with households that include a relatively high number of non-income earners in proportion to income earners, with unpaid family workers classified under the latter category (Uruguay, Department of Statistics and Censuses/ECLAC, 1989, pp. 68-70).

The first refinement that had to be made was an adjustment of the education requirement, depending on the age of the head of household. Analysis of data from a household survey in Uruguay showed that while for heads of household under 45 years of age failure to complete their primary education correlated closely with personal earnings below the poverty line, for those above 45 the number of years of education needed to rise above the poverty line was much lower. The difference was due in part to rights and privileges acquired by seniority on the job, but also to the changes that had come about in hiring criteria. A good portion of those over 45 years of age joined the labour force at a time when knowing how to read and write were sufficient skills for a job candidate in the public sector and in many private-sector occupations. Once they found their place in the workforce, the accumulation of experience and accrual of rights in a heavily unionized market enabled them to reach and maintain an income level that was high compared to what individuals in later generations with similar levels of education could obtain.

These considerations led to the definition of different levels of education for the two age groups to indicate a roughly similar advantage in the labour market. For the younger group a minimum of five years of primary education was postulated. For the group over 45 years of age, the minimum was set at only two years of formal education, reflecting the fact that for a long time schools in rural areas of Uruguay offered only three years of primary education.

Looking at the data for this indicator ten years later, two changes were observable. First of all, the average educational attainment of heads of households in both age groups had risen. The over-45 age group now included the cohort that had been aged 35 to 44 at the time of the previous census, characterized by more years of schooling, while the under-45 age group now incorporated a cohort many of whose members had been students at the time of the pre-

vious census. Moreover, education had become devalued, as reflected in lower average absolute and relative incomes earned for a given level of formal education. The latter phenomenon was observable not only in Uruguay, but in all the Latin American countries for which information is available between 1980 and 1990 (ECLAC, 1994, table 51, pp. 203 and following). In other words, in order to allow for a valid comparison, the changes mentioned should be reflected by modifying the minimum number of years of schooling established for each age group as an indicator of subsistence capacity.

To sum up, even without modification, the indicators of unmet basic needs still make it possible to track advances or setbacks with respect to each indicator taken separately and, with due caution, to draw inferences concerning the success or failure of policies aimed at overcoming a specific deficiency. But they do not provide a sound basis for estimating an overall increase or decrease in poverty or the number of households with critical deficiencies. For the latter estimate, the selected indicators will need to be revalidated in order to ensure that they are representative of the set of psychological, material and cultural factors that constitute at any given point in time the minimum conditions considered necessary for a decent standard of living in a given society.

2. Factors that affect trends in the index of unmet basic needs

At this point, it may be helpful to take a moment to consider more closely some of the factors that determine the trends in indicators of unmet basic needs. In this regard, let me begin with an observation. Contrary to what one might expect, in most of the countries for which data is available on trends in unmet basic needs of households during the economic crisis of the 1980s, the deterioration in the situation of households was not in keeping with the decline in employment and income.

This fact emerges from analysis of the data contained in a number of national and regional documents showing the trend in the percentage of households with basic needs unmet at different periods in the 1980s in eight countries: Argentina, Bolivia, Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, Peru, Uruguay and Venezuela (UNDP, 1990; Uruguay, Social Investment Programme, 1994; Ortega and Tironi, 1988). Of these eight, only Peru showed a small increase from 1981 to 1985 in the percentage of

TABLE 1

Latin America (five countries): Urban households with unmet basic needs and below the poverty line
(Percentage of total urban households)

	Year	Unmet basic needs	Year	Below the poverty line
Argentina ^a	1980	16.6	1980	5.0
	1988	11.5	1990	16.0
Colombia	1973	50.0	1970	38.0
	1988	15.1	1988	35.5
Peru ^b	1981	27.0	1979	29.0
	1986	27.2	1986	37.0
Uruguay ^c	1984	11.1	1985	20.5
	1989	8.4	1992	9.2
Venezuela	1981	34.3	1981	12.0
	1988	27.0	1988	20.0

Sources: Households below the poverty line: ECLAC, 1994. Households with unmet basic needs: UNDP, 1990; for Uruguay: ECLAC, 1990.

^a Greater Buenos Aires. ^b Lima and Callao. ^c Montevideo.

the urban population with basic needs unmet. Moreover, in the few cases in which I was able to roughly match up the areas and periods of the data on percentages of households with basic needs unmet and on percentages of households below the poverty line, the results show a striking divergence between the trends in the two indicators (see table 1), with a markedly more positive evolution of the unmet basic needs indicator.

The reasons for the discrepancy have been analysed from different perspectives in several studies (Bustelo and Minujin, 1994; Botvinik, 1990; Kaztman and Gerstenfeld, 1990). In general, they reflect the impact of such factors as:

i) The maturation period of investments in education, housing, sanitation and drinking water infrastructure that were made prior to the crisis but only began to have an effect on household living conditions during the crisis;⁴

ii) The inertia of cultural factors, so that, for example, once the idea is implanted that education leads to better living conditions, parents tend to make sacrifices to keep their children in school;

iii) Reluctance to give up advances in access to public services (water, sanitation, education) or gains resulting from investment realized in the past (housing); this reluctance creates priorities in the dissaving process, i.e., in the order in which households affected by economic crisis relinquish goods and services;

iv) The priorities Governments assign to action in "soft" areas of social intervention, i.e., areas that offer less institutional, political or cultural resistance,

rather than in "hard" areas, such as wages, employment and income generation and distribution, which have a greater impact on levels of social equity;

v) Government preferences for selecting and setting readily understandable goals;⁵ a number of Governments in the region have used some of the indicators that make up the index to set social goals and have concentrated their efforts on reducing the level of critical deficiencies that the indicators reveal;

vi) As mentioned earlier, a number of the indicators selected are linked directly or indirectly to the birth rate (overcrowding, school attendance and subsistence capacity). The indicators are likely to fall when there are fewer children or when children make up a smaller proportion of total population (the percentage of households below the poverty line should decline for the same reasons). Given the long-standing trend towards a declining birth rate in all the countries of the region, one could expect that for that reason alone there would be a drop in the percentage of households with unmet basic needs.

Consideration of these factors will help to clarify what the reduction in the percentage of households with unmet basic needs actually means in the context of an anti-poverty programme, without denying that such a reduction may imply a real improvement in household living conditions.

⁵ It should be born in mind that support for a social goal depends not only on its content but also on the way it is presented. If a programme is well launched, so that it is immediately clear what it aims to accomplish, it facilitates communication of the objective, arouses more popular support for the idea and ensures a better reception for its contents. This has been the case with the unmet basic needs approach.

⁴ This observation calls attention to the need to take account of time elements in evaluating the impact of programmes.

IV

Spatial comparability

As we have said, one of the basic criteria for defining the indicators that make up the index of unmet basic needs is that the cut-off point for each indicator must be situated at a sufficiently critical level (indicating acute deprivation), while the alternatives for fulfilling each unmet need must be within the domain of options generally available to households in the statistical universe analysed.

The application of the above criterion, however, has been subordinated in some cases to the nature of the need. It is assumed that in the case of some of the needs analysed, it is essential that a given level be met in order for individuals to become integrated into their society, regardless of whether it is hard or easy to attain that level given the local infrastructure. One such need is school attendance by children of school age. It is well understood that such factors as the distance between home and school, the condition of the roads, the problem of transportation, the climate, the school infrastructure, the teaching materials and staff the schools have available, and the demand for child labour in agricultural tasks all tend to make it harder for children in some rural areas to attend school. Nevertheless, it is felt that if a school-age child does not attend school, he or she is condemned to exclusion and marginalization in either a rural or urban environment and has been denied a right that is a necessary precondition for integration into today's labour market and for the exercise of full citizenship. In other words, non-attendance at school is a critical deficiency anywhere within a country, and as such is a fact of great relevance for the design and implementation of educational policy.

Leaving aside school attendance, however, it can be said with respect to the other indicators that the decision to select satisfaction thresholds that are within the domain of options available to all the households of a given country, while it offers the advantage of minimizing the risk of including the non-poor, also entails the disadvantage of a downward-levelling effect, which, by accentuating the critical nature of each deficiency, biases the data towards the exclusion of the urban poor and ultimately results in an underestimate of urban poverty.

The decision to apply the same indicators to both urban and rural areas implies an assumption of cultural homogeneity. It is undoubtedly true that the way individuals perceive their situation is greatly influenced by the images prevailing in their world of what is considered a decent standard of living. Their perceptions in turn affect their attitudes and behaviour, their feelings of belonging or exclusion with respect to the community in which they live, their capacity and disposition to make use of the "social capital" that results from participation in their community and, ultimately, their response to opportunities that may come their way to escape poverty.⁶ In many countries of the region, for example, the lack of a television or access to piped water produces a sense of relative deprivation in the members of an urban household, whereas very likely this situation would not evoke the same response in a rural environment.

Considerations such as these underline the advisability of developing separate indicators for rural and urban areas, or assigning a different weighting to indicator components. To do so, however, necessitates a more complex methodological design and ends up being more costly. In the first place, adjusting the definition and validation of indicators to living standards in different areas involves more detailed work. Secondly, having admitted the importance of the cultural element in differentiating rural from urban and having thus made the significance of deficiencies relative, one then has to apply the same criterion (or justify not applying it) to differentiate other areas (urban centres of different sizes, for example, or regions such as northeastern and southern Brazil).

⁶ In a recent work on the new poor in Argentina, Minujin and Kessler speak of the "social capital" of households, in the sense of the resources households can muster through networks of personal contacts, and of how this capital is "spent" as the households fall into poverty (Minujin and Kessler, 1995).

Given the costs and design complexity involved in taking subcultural factors into account, this should be done only when the significance of such factors is very evident. Since it is not easy to come up with evidence in this regard, a practical solution is to take as an approximate indicator the extent of the differences in the standard of living between the various areas of a country. In countries with greater homo-

geneity, the same indicators can be applied to the entire country, while in countries with more pronounced differences, one can try to define indicators that reflect the different meanings that populations assign to access to the same services. This approach avoids downward levelling and hence reduces the risk of excluding from the category of urban poor those who consider themselves poor and act as such.

V

Timeliness of the information

The census basis of the maps imposes definite limitations on their capacity to reflect changes in the situation of potential beneficiaries of social policies. Countries that have a system of annual or semi-annual surveys and succeed in combining information from this source with census data are able to monitor trends in the proportion of households with critical deficiencies and in their socio-demographic profiles. In order for such monitoring, which of course applies only to the localities represented by the survey sample, to have validity, it is necessary to keep close track of what constitutes the threshold

standard of living that most of the society considers acceptable and to have the human and financial resources to adjust the indicators whenever there are significant changes in the threshold.

While it is theoretically possible to monitor trends for the entire population during the period between censuses, in most cases household surveys do not allow for a level of breakdown of the updated information that is useful for targeting social policies, and hence there is a mismatch between the flow of data and the evolution of beneficiary needs and anti-poverty programme management requirements.⁷

VI

Appropriateness of the research variables

Indicators of unmet basic needs are selected to be representative of the critical deficiencies from which a country's households may suffer. Since, however, different social groups admittedly suffer from different deficiencies and since for practical reasons it is sensible to keep the number of indicators small, the index that summarizes the combination of the necessarily limited number of indicators will inevitably be more sensitive to deficiencies that affect some segments of society than others.

To illustrate: it is frequently objected that the indicators commonly used are slanted towards families with children (overcrowding, school attendance, subsistence capacity) and do not give due consideration to households whose members are in other stages of the family life cycle (homes with elderly

people, for example). A bias obviously does exist. The direction of the bias depends on the limitations of the information sources and on the priorities of those responsible for social policy, expressed within the narrow margin of indicator choice that the sources permit.

With respect to social policy priorities, the decision to select indicators more apt to identify situations that chiefly affect minors is based on the conclusion, supported by the results of many studies, that it is precisely among families with children that

⁷ The reader is referred to ECLAC (1995a) for a detailed examination of the virtues and limitations of various instruments for selecting beneficiaries of social programmes and of the drawbacks of each with regard to updating information with the periodicity required for programme management.

the proportion of poor households is the largest, that the proportion of children in poverty is greater than for any other age group, and that policies to break the cycle of poverty perpetuation are best targeted

towards households where children predominate. Breaking the perpetuation cycle appears to be the most effective way of attacking the problem of poverty over the medium and long term.

VII

Conclusion

A map of unmet basic needs is an extremely useful tool for designing and implementing social policy and particularly for making the best use of resources in the fight against poverty. It is highly efficient in view of the relative ease with which it can be applied and the low cost involved in utilizing the results of an operation –the census– which already has its own funding, which States regularly perform and which covers the entire population at once. The maps make it possible to pinpoint small areas of human settlement that have a high concentration of households with unmet basic needs, to examine the specific critical deficiencies from which they suffer and to analyse their socio-demographic profiles.

The limitations of the method are clear. Census data are far less reliable and accurate than data obtained using a tool specifically designed for investigating critical deficiencies. When the same threshold

indicators are applied uniformly to the entire country, the new poor are not identified and urban poverty is underestimated.

Monitoring the trend in the proportion of households with unmet basic needs requires close attention to changes in general living standards and constant adjustment of the indicators, or their relative weighting, to reflect those changes. Spatial comparison necessitates consideration of the cultural patterns that affect how people in different geographic areas evaluate their own living conditions.

The decision whether or not to elaborate and apply methodological designs to overcome some of these limitations will have to be made on a case-by-case basis by weighing the extra costs the procedure would entail against the extra benefits in achieving the goals that justify the preparation of census maps.

(Original: Spanish).

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