

Knowledge to Policy: Understanding Poverty to Create Policies that Facilitate Zero Poverty in Brunei Darussalam

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Abstract

The Government of Brunei Darussalam aspires to place Brunei Darussalam (hereafter Brunei) in the top ten countries with the highest quality of life by 2035. In line with this aspiration, the government has set a Zero Poverty 2035 target. But what constitutes poverty in Brunei is not well-known, and this is likely to hamper the country's poverty elimination efforts. Hence, stakeholders have called for studies to understand the nature of poverty in Brunei. The studies, as we argue, should generate poverty knowledge that is reliable for policy creation. Poverty knowledge that is reliable for policy formulation is that which reflects the characteristics of poverty. Characteristically, poverty is context-specific, experiential, multidimensional and complex. The knowledge should also be generated in the realm of human development that underpins Brunei's Zero Poverty 2035 target. The generation of such knowledge depends on a poverty worldview that the studies will choose. Mostly, poverty is construed through the income, basic needs and capability worldviews. This paper sheds light on how these three worldviews interpret poverty, and it examines the appropriateness of each worldview in generating poverty knowledge that is reliable for policy creation in Brunei. As the paper reveals, the income, basic needs and capability worldviews construe poverty differently. The capability worldview is the most appropriate because it adequately acknowledges the characteristics of poverty and is firmly linked to the human development paradigm.

Introduction

The Government of Brunei is dedicated to upholding a high level of quality of life for its citizens. The government distributes the lion's share of the national budget towards the improvement of the quality of life in the country, for example in the 9th (2007-2012) and 10th (2013-2017) National Development Plans. This dedication enabled Brunei to achieve the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) relating to poverty, education and health before the 2015 deadline (Department of Economic Planning and Development, 2010; Hab, 2015). The government, under Brunei Vision 2035, is working towards placing Brunei in the top ten countries with the highest quality of life (Brunei Darussalam Long-term Development Plan, n.d). In line with this aspiration, the government has set a Zero Poverty 2035 target (Department of Economic Planning and Development, 2010; Othman, 2008).

Little, however, is known about what constitutes poverty in Brunei, and this is likely to constrain the country's efforts at achieving the Zero Poverty target (Amir Noor, 2012; Kon, 2015; Rabiatal Kamit, 2014; Thien, 2016a; 2016b). Hence, stakeholders, primarily social enterprises and Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), have called for more poverty studies on the nature of poverty in Brunei, including profiles of the poor (Amir Noor, 2012; Department of Economic Planning and Development, 2010; Kon, 2015; Ubaidillah Masli, 2008; Thien 2016a). The studies, as we argue, should generate poverty knowledge that is reliable for policy creation. Poverty knowledge that is reliable for policy formulation is that which reflects the characteristics of poverty. Characteristically, poverty is context-specific, experiential, multidimensional and complex. The knowledge should also be generated in the realm of human development that underpins Brunei's Zero Poverty 2035 target. The generation of such knowledge depends on the studies' choice of poverty worldview.

Poverty is mostly construed using three worldviews: the income worldview, the basic needs worldview, and the capability worldview (Chambers, 2006, 2012; Lister, 2004; Sen, 1999; Streeten, 1979). This paper explains how these three worldviews interpret poverty, and it examines the appropriateness of each worldview in generating policy-reliable poverty knowledge in Brunei.

A background to Brunei

Brunei – the land of continuity and stability (Oxford Business Group, 2014) – is a small country with a land area of 5,765 km² (Department of Economic Planning and Development, 2010) and is situated on the Northwest of the island of Borneo, Southeast Asia.

Based on 2018 mid-year population estimates, Brunei has a total population of 442,400 – distributed as follows, by gender: male 233,400 and female 209,000; by district: Brunei Muara 307,000, Belait 73,200, Tutong 51,300 and Temburong 10,900; and by ethnicity: Malays 290,700, Chinese 45,600 and Other races 106,100 (Department of Economic Planning and Development, 2018).

Bruneians enjoy a high-quality life. They are well educated, healthy, long-living and are satisfied with their housing, standard of living, public safety, the social welfare system, social networks and the conditions of their environment (Inoguchi & Fujii, 2013; Rose Abdullah & Nurhasanah Morsid, 2013). The high level of quality of life in Brunei is attributed to the country's generous and resilient welfare system, which covers virtually all basic goods and services, such as education, health, housing and food (Noor Hasharina Hassan, 2018; Noor Hasharina Hassan & Yong, 2019; Rose Abdullah & Nurhasanah Morsid, 2013). Brunei is faring well on the UNDP human development annual rankings. In 2016, it had a Human Development Index (HDI) of 0.865, so it was ranked in the very high human development category (UNDP, 2016).

Worldviews of poverty

The word itself, poverty, is a familiar one which everyone understands, or thinks they understand. But the specific meaning we attach to the word depends upon [the] underlying concept of poverty ...
(MacPherson & Silburn, 1998, p.1)

How poverty is defined or interpreted depends on the chosen poverty worldview (MacPherson & Silburn, 1998). A worldview, by definition, is a conceptual scheme through which reality, life or the world is defined, perceived, interpreted, explained or construed (Miller & Guthrie, 1998; Naugle, 2002). As highlighted earlier, poverty is mostly construed through the income, basic needs and capability worldviews. This section explains how these three worldviews interpret poverty.

Poverty through the income worldview

The income worldview interprets poverty in 'dollar' (monetary) terms (Chambers, 2012; Spicker, Leguizamón, & Gordon, 2007; World Bank, 2005) as lack of income (Lister, 2004; Yip, 2012; World Bank, 2001) or as "shortfall in a monetary indicator" (Laderchi, 2000, p.2). The poor and non-poor people are separated by a cut-off line (poverty line), which is an income level that an average person requires to live a tolerable life (Bhalla, 2002; Demombynes & Vu, 2015; Weerahewa & Wickramasinghe, 2005). A person is considered poor if his or her earnings (income) are below the cut-off line (Atkinson, 1989; Boran, 2010; Haase & Foley, 2009).

This notion of understanding poverty through the income lens "has a long tradition" (World Bank 2001, p.16). It was devised by Charles Booth in 1886 for his poverty study in London, and Seebom B. Rowntree adopted the idea in 1897 to study poverty in York, Britain (Marris, 1999; Rowntree, 1902; Silburn, 1998). Today, many international and national development institutions such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF), United Nations (UN), World Bank, NGOs, and governments predominantly use income to conceptualise poverty, conceive anti-poverty measures and trace progress on poverty reduction. For instance, the World Bank construes global poverty as per capita income of USD 1.90 a day (Hickel, 2015; Jolliffe & Prydz, 2015). This international definition is used to trace countries' progress towards achieving Sustainable Development Goal 1, which focuses on poverty elimination by 2030.

Poverty through the basic needs worldview

As Mowafi and Khawaja (2005, p. 262) state, “rather than income, the poor are more likely to describe their reality in terms of physical, human, social and environmental assets.” This is the foundation of the basic needs worldview, which interprets poverty in material terms as “the deprivation of requirements, mainly material for meeting basic human needs” (Mabughi & Selim, 2006, p. 189), unmet basic needs (O’Boyle, 1999; Streeten, 1979), “material lack or want” (Chambers, 2006, p. 3) or “the status of consumption deprivation” (Yip, 2012, p. 9). The basic needs worldview gained popularity in the 1970s when development institutions sought a better way of helping poor and vulnerable people to meet their basic needs by using development resources efficiently (Mabughi & Selim, 2006; Sehnbruch, 2006; Streeten, 1979).

The basic needs worldview expands the meaning of poverty to include the non-monetary dimensions of poverty that the income worldview neglects (Asselin, 2009; Kingdon & Knight, 2003; Mabughi & Selim, 2006). Hence, the worldview inspired a wave of proactive poverty eradication measures like integrated rural development from the 1970s through to the 1990s (Overseas Development Institute, 1978; Yip, 2012).

Poverty through the capability worldview

The capability worldview, developed by Amartya Sen, is an alternative to the income and basic needs worldviews (Lister, 2004; Gough, 2014; Sen, 1999). Sen argues that poverty should be construed based not on what people have (income and resources) but on their ability to achieve the ‘doings’ and ‘beings’ (functionings) (Hick, 2016; Sen, 1999). Thus, the capability worldview construes poverty in the space of capabilities (Alkire, 2008; Gough 2014; Sen, 1999, 2009). By definition, capabilities refer to people’s abilities or opportunities to achieve functionings (Clark, 2005; Nunes, 2008; Sen, 1999). Functionings refer to ‘doings’ and ‘beings’ – what people value doing or being, such as being safe, well-nourished, escaping morbidity and mortality, self-respect, and appearing in public without shame (Alkire, 2008; Lister 2004).

Through the capability lens, Amartya Sen re-invents and deepens the meaning of poverty. He re-construes poverty as lack of basic capabilities required to achieve certain functionings at a minimum level (Hick, 2012; Sehnbruch, 2006; Sen, 1999). He links the meaning of poverty to the broader perspective of human development, and this has made his thoughts become a foundation for the United Nations’ human development reports (Lister, 2004).

As the discussion of the three poverty worldviews reveals, each one defines poverty differently. The income worldview construes poverty in monetary terms, the basic needs worldview in material terms, and the capability worldview in capability terms. Thus, the three worldviews bring forth differing poverty knowledge which results in the identification of different groups of poor people in a given community, and the conception of different anti-poverty measures since, as Taundi (2012, pp.9–10) notes, “different perspectives of poverty lead to different ways of solving the problems.”

Generation of policy-reliable poverty knowledge in Brunei

Policy-reliable poverty knowledge is that which reflects the characteristics of poverty presented in Box 1A, and, in the context of Brunei, the knowledge should also be generated through the human development lens, which underpins Brunei’s Zero Poverty 2035 target (see Box 1B). To generate such poverty knowledge, poverty studies in Brunei should use an appropriate poverty worldview – one which sufficiently acknowledges the characteristics of poverty, and is anchored on the human development paradigm.

As stressed earlier, the three most-used poverty worldviews – income, basic needs and capability – construe poverty differently: so, which poverty worldview would be suitable for generating the required poverty knowledge in Brunei? This section, therefore, examines the appropriateness of each poverty worldview in generating poverty knowledge reliable for policy creation in Brunei.

BOX IA: The characteristics of poverty	BOX IB: Brunei's development ideology
<p>Poverty is context-specific – “experienced differently by men and [by] women and can differ according to a geographical area, social group, and political or economic context” (Ali-Akpajiak & Pyke, 2003, p. 5). Poor people are “not a homogenous group” (Ali-Akpajiak & Pyke, 2003, p. 5). Hence, poverty should be understood in light of the environmental, socio-economic, political and historical contexts in which it exists (Lister, 2004; World Bank, 2001). Additionally, poverty is experiential – it is a state/or condition of being (Chambers, 2012; Sen, 1999). Lastly, poverty is multidimensional and complex; it has socio-economic, political and environmental dimensions which interlock and reinforce each other (Chambers, 2012; World Bank, 2001).</p>	<p>Brunei's Zero Poverty by 2035 target is linked to the Brunei Vision (Wawasan) 2035 which seeks to place Brunei in the top 10 countries with the highest quality of life. The Brunei government uses the UNDP's Human Development Index (HDI) to measure the country's progress towards achieving the quality of life target (Brunei Darussalam Long-term Development Plan, n.d.). By implication, the government subscribes to human development ideology for its policies on quality of life. Therefore, the Zero Poverty 2035 target is, by default, anchored on human development paradigm, which, according to UNDP (1990, p. 10), focuses on “enlarging people's choices” for people to achieve their desired states of being or conditions of life, such as having as a long and healthy life, being highly educated and having self-respect. The ideology centres on ends (states of being/conditions of life) and not means (UNDP, 1995). Lastly, the human development concept puts people at the center of development (UNDP, 1995).</p>

The income worldview and policy-reliable poverty knowledge

The income worldview's appropriateness in generating policy-reliable poverty knowledge in Brunei is limited due to:

- (i) The income worldview does not satisfactorily respect the context-specific characteristic of poverty. It scarcely pays attention to heterogeneities at the community, household and personal levels (Weerahewa & Wickramasinghe, 2005). Put differently, the worldview homogenises the poor: and it assumes that “households with the same income have similar standards of living” (*Instituto Nacional de Estadística*, n.d, p. 24). For instance, the international income poverty classifies the poor as anyone in the world whose total daily earning or income is less than USD 1.90 (Hickel, 2015; Jolliffe & Prydz, 2015), yet poverty in African countries is not similar to poverty in European or Asian countries.
- (ii) The income worldview does not lead to the generation of poverty knowledge which clearly describes poverty as a state of being or condition of life. It interprets poverty indirectly (Lister, 2004), as it focuses on income, which is a ‘means’ to the actual state of being or condition of life. A person or household is considered poor or not poor based on a set poverty line, such as USD 1.90 a day, and not on the actual state of life. Such an interpretation of poverty is quite misleading as one may earn above a poverty line but still be poor in terms of well-being outcomes (Lu, 2012). For example, in India, Stewart, Saith and Harris-White (2007) found that 53% of the malnourished children in their study were not living in income-poor households.
- (iii) The income worldview overlooks the multidimensionality and complexity of poverty. It construes poverty as a mono-dimensional phenomenon – lack of income (Chambers, 2006). The worldview overlooks non-monetary poverty dimensions, such as isolation, social inferiority, powerlessness, physical weakness, vulnerability, ill-health and lack of participation. Whenever the non-monetary poverty dimensions appear on the income worldview radar, income is used as the proxy (Chambers, 1995, 1997), but that can be imperfectly achieved as many of the non-

monetary dimensions scarcely correlate with income (Gweshengwe, 2019). The fact that the income worldview identifies poverty as mono-dimensional implies that it disregards the complexity of poverty which emerges from the interconnection of the multiple dimensions of poverty (Chambers, 1997).

- (iv) The income worldview's conception of poverty does not perfectly conform to the human development paradigm. It focuses on 'means' (income) to desired states of being/conditions of life (Chambers, 1995; Sen, 1999) yet the human development paradigm focuses on 'ends' (actual states of being) (UNDP, 1995). Another area where the income worldview falls short of the human development paradigm is on characteristics of poverty. As highlighted earlier, poverty is context-specific, experiential, multidimensional and complex: these poverty characteristics are at the heart of the human development paradigm but less regarded by the income worldview. Lastly, the income worldview leads to poverty policies which, according to Khodabakhshi (2011, p. 251), advance "[the] richness of the economy" and not "[the] richness of human life" which is the principal goal of human development.

Thus, the income worldview's ability to generate policy-reliable poverty knowledge in Brunei is disputable. The worldview's lack of sufficient regard for the socio-economic, political and geographical contexts means that the anti-poverty measures to be conceived will not be context-specific but one-size-fits-all. Also, the worldview's focus on 'the instrument' (income) that people need to avert or escape an undesired state of being (ill-being) may yield poverty knowledge that is misleading for policymakers – making them conceive poverty policies which either benefit non-poor people (inclusion error) or exclude poor people (exclusion error). Furthermore, the income worldview's neglect of the multidimensionality and complexity of poverty implies that it generates shallow and distorted poverty knowledge. This, as Lu asserts, "can lead to ...narrow adoption of targeting, monitoring and evaluation criteria, reproducing the approach's many blind spots into operational phases of interventions" (2012, p. 4). The income worldview's focus on one dimension of poverty (income) will result in generation of poverty knowledge fraught with policy biases: it prescribes anti-poverty policies or measures which will raise private income instead of public goods delivery, and accelerate or sustain economic growth (wealth or opulence) rather than human development (Chambers, 1995; Lu, 2012). Lastly, the income worldview's conception of poverty is not perfectly in line with the development ideology that anchors Brunei's Zero Poverty 2035 target – the human development paradigm. This means that poverty knowledge from the income worldview will be of little help to Brunei's poverty alleviation efforts.

The basic needs worldview and policy-reliable poverty knowledge

Like the income worldview, the basic needs worldview is not entirely appropriate for the generation of policy-reliable poverty knowledge in Brunei because:

- (i) The basic needs worldview does not pay adequate attention to the context-specific nature of poverty. People's choices and needs, as Yip (2012, p. 5) notes, "vary in different time and contexts." Yip's assertion concurs with the argument of Noor Hasharina Hassan (2010; 2017) who stresses that what is seen as needs may vary geographically and individually, and something that is considered to be a need in one society is defined as a luxury in another. But, as Sehnbruch (2006) asserts, the basic needs worldview scarcely respects people's socio-economic, political and geographical circumstances which make people's needs and choices vary. Experts arbitrarily predetermine the constituents of the consumption bundle, which they consider as uniformly needed by every person in a community to lead a tolerable life (Yip, 2012). This implies that the basic needs worldview overlooks the heterogeneity of choices and needs at personal, community and national levels. The basic needs worldview, therefore, perceives the poor as a homogenous group of individuals whose level of basic needs satisfaction is below a predefined consumption bundle.

- (ii) The basic needs worldview neglects the experiential trait of poverty. It exclusively focuses, like the income worldview, on ‘means’ (basic goods and services) for achieving well-being (desired life) and not on the quality of actual states of being/conditions of life (Phillips, 2006). The worldview treats access to goods and services as an end in itself. Hence, the worldview is criticised for ‘commodity fetishism’ (Phillips, 2006). Indeed, access to economic/physical, social, human and environmental assets is significant, but it does not reveal much about people’s actual states of being. Having enough material resources does not guarantee improved wellbeing, as that depends on people’s abilities to use the resources for the betterment of their lives (Sen, 1999).
- (iii) The basic needs worldview does not sufficiently regard the multidimensionality and complexity of poverty. According to Yip (2012, p. 4), “the central notion of the basic needs approach is essentially materialistic.” The worldview has “nothing to say about the quality of life” beyond having access to basic goods and services: food, shelter, water, health and education (Phillips, 2006, p. 81). This reveals that the basic needs worldview interprets poverty as mono-dimensional – material deprivation. As highlighted earlier, poverty has multiple and interconnected dimensions, and according to Chambers (2012, p. 40) material deprivation is “only one of several mutually reinforcing dimensions”.
- (iv) The basic needs worldview’s interpretation of poverty is not seamlessly in accordance with the human development paradigm. The worldview, as discussed above, does not satisfactorily interpret poverty as context-specific, experiential, multidimensional and complex. These poverty characteristics shape the notion of human development.

The basic needs worldview, therefore, is also a not entirely suitable poverty worldview for the generation of policy-reliable poverty knowledge in Brunei. It does not lead to the generation of poverty knowledge which describes poverty as contextual, experiential, multidimensional and complex. Additionally, the basic needs worldview’s conception of poverty is not in conformity with the human development paradigm – an anchor of Brunei’s anti-poverty measures.

The capability worldview and policy-reliable poverty knowledge

As highlighted earlier, Amartya Sen’s capability-based interpretation of poverty is an alternative to income and basic needs poverty worldviews. The capability worldview does address, sufficiently, the flaws that make the income and basic needs worldviews less appropriate for the generation of policy-reliable poverty knowledge in Brunei. For example:

- (i) The capability worldview fully accepts that poverty is contextual. It satisfactorily acknowledges the heterogeneities that exist at personal, household, community and country levels (Sehnbruch, 2006). The heterogeneities, as Sen (1999, 2009) explains, are from four sources: (i) personal – age, sex, disabilities, illness, etc.; (ii) physical environment – temperatures, rainfall, humidity, geomorphology, etc.; (iii) social climate – cultural or religious norms, public health and education arrangements etc.; and (iv) differences in relational perspectives – attitudes, behaviours, manners etc. Thus, the capability worldview does not treat the poor as a homogenous group.
- (ii) The capability worldview perceives poverty as an experiential phenomenon – a condition of life. It does not focus on income, goods and services (means) but on the state of being or conditions of life (ends) (Mowafi & Khawaja, 2005; Sehnbruch, 2006; Sen, 1999). As Sen asserts, income, goods and services do not count in their own right as they are instrumental to what truly count – people’s actual achievements (wellbeing or state of life) that are determined by the choices and opportunities open to them (Lister, 2004; Sen, 1999). The capability worldview focuses on the state of life (people’s actual achievements), which has an intrinsic value. Hence, as Sen recommends, poverty should be studied through the capability lens (Sen, 1999, 2009).

- (iii) The capability worldview interprets poverty as a multidimensional and complex phenomenon. Its constituents, capabilities and functionings are, characteristically, all-encompassing (Alkire, 2008). They cover all dimensions of life – socio-economic, political, geographical, etc. Additionally, the application of the capability approach in studying poverty is governed by its pluralism and non-reducibility principles (Nussbaum, 2011). The pluralism principle implies that analysis of poverty should cover all aspects of life, as the realities of the people, the poor in particular, are complex, local, varied and multiple (Nussbaum, 2011; Sen, 2009). The non-reducibility is premised on the fact that people’s capabilities and functionings are distinct in both quality and quantity; hence, they “cannot be reduced to a single metric without distortion” (Nussbaum, 2011, p. 18).
- (iv) The capability worldview is firmly linked to the human development paradigm. The notion of capabilities, which is at the core of the capability worldview, anchors the human development ideology (UNDP, 1990). The notion “provides the theoretical underpinning of much discussion of human development” (Stewart 2013, p. 1). Also, the capability worldview is people-centred. It emphasises human lives and not “some detached objects of convenience such as income or commodities that a person possesses” (Sen, 2009, p. 233). Similarly, the human development ideology is people-centred – it puts, at the centre of development, the expansion of people’s choices or opportunities that improve wellbeing (UNDP, 1990, 1995; Phillips, 2006).

From the above observations, and by comparing it with the other poverty worldviews, the capability worldview is the most appropriate poverty worldview for studying poverty in Brunei. It guarantees the generation of poverty knowledge that policymakers and other stakeholders in Brunei can confidently rely on. As highlighted above, the capability worldview sufficiently acknowledges the context-specific nature of poverty. Brunei has some variations in context (urban vs interior/rural and water vs land settlements); in ethnicity (Malay, Chinese, Dusun and other races); in gender; and in age. The capability worldview, unlike other poverty worldviews, has enormous potential to explain what poverty in Brunei entails by context, ethnicity, gender and age. This is essential for policymaking as it makes it possible for the creation of context- or individual-specific and not ‘one-size-fits-all’ poverty policies and programmes. Also, the capability worldview’s focus on the state of life or conditions of life would result in the generation of poverty knowledge that defines who is truly poor in Brunei. This makes it feasible for the government, social enterprises, NGOs and other stakeholders to minimise the inclusion and exclusion errors of poverty reduction efforts. Furthermore, the capability worldview’s respect of multidimensionality and complexity of poverty would lead to the generation of poverty knowledge that reflects the dimensions and complexity of poverty in Brunei. This would result in the formulation of poverty policies that are sensitive to the multidimensionality and complexity of poverty in the country. Lastly, as stressed above, the capability worldview is firmly connected to the human development ideology, which underpins Brunei’s Zero Poverty 2035 target. The worldview, therefore, necessitates the generation of poverty knowledge that makes feasible the formulation of poverty reduction policies that are consistent with Brunei’s development ideology.

Conclusion

As revealed in this paper, the Government of Brunei is committed to upholding a high quality of life in Brunei. The country has registered good results in both human and economic development realms, which shows that the government has enormous potential to achieve the Zero Poverty 2035 target, thereby placing Brunei in the top ten countries with a high quality of life. But the achievement of the Zero Poverty target is likely to be hampered by a lack of knowledge on the nature of poverty in the country. This has resulted in the call for poverty studies in the country. The studies should generate poverty knowledge that is reliable for policy creation, and that depends on the studies’ choice of poverty worldview.

This paper has discussed the three most-used poverty worldviews: income, basic needs and capability. As the discussion reveals, each of them construes poverty differently. The income worldview interprets poverty as lack of income, the basic needs worldview defines poverty as unsatisfied basic needs or a lack

of material needs, and the capability worldview construes poverty as capability deprivations. The variation between these worldviews in interpreting poverty makes one ask: which one of the three is appropriate for the generation of policy knowledge that is reliable for policy creation in Brunei? A most appropriate poverty worldview, as concluded in this paper, is one that sufficiently acknowledges that poverty is context-specific, experiential, multidimensional and complex; and the worldview should be linked to the human development ideology that underpins Brunei's Zero Poverty 2035 target. From the analysis, the capability worldview emerged as the most appropriate poverty worldview because it sufficiently acknowledges the characteristics of poverty and is firmly linked to the human development paradigm.

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