

Computing pre-conflict poverty figures and profile in Syria

Samer Hamati, Universidade do Minho, Portugal

Although some recent reports point out that deteriorating living conditions were a key factor leading to the current violent conflict in Syria, none has sufficiently investigated pre-conflict poverty rates at the governorate level. The United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) is the only entity that computed national poverty figures for 2009 (ESCWA 2017). It found that the national rates of food, extreme, and overall poverty rates in Syria decreased to 1.5 per cent, 10 per cent, and 24.8 per cent, respectively, in 2009. It is clear, however, that ESCWA's estimates are counter-intuitive due to two main reasons: first is the unprecedented waves of drought hitting the area in the years immediately preceding the conflict; second, cuts in energy subsidies in May 2008 had a strong negative effect on people who were just above the poverty line. Thus, this One Pager summarises findings in Hamati (2019), which computes poverty rates for Syria in 2009, using a sample from that year's household income and expenditure survey. We try to fill a gap and compute poverty figures and profiles at the governorate basis in a country which was on its way to being engulfed in a very violent civil conflict two years later.

We follow the same technique used in the previous poverty studies for Syria, by building the food poverty line (FPL) in every governorate. However, we could not follow the same approach since our subsample lacks the quantities of food consumed by each decile of households in 2009. Therefore, we use the reference food baskets, derived from El-Laithy and Abu-Ismaïl (2005) to find adjusted food consumer price indices (CPIs) for 2009. We then multiply each of these adjusted food CPIs by its regional FPL, which was computed by Abu-Ismaïl, Abdel-Gadir and El-Laithy (2011), to determine the 2009 FPL. In the next step, we estimate the lower and upper poverty lines. Finally, we assess the welfare status of every household, using expenditure instead of income as a welfare measure.

The results show that the percentage of people living under the lower poverty line increased from 12.3 per cent in 2007 to 14.85 per cent in 2009, while the percentage of people living under the upper poverty line decreased from 33.6 per cent in 2007 to 29.4 per cent in 2009. We find also that rural areas are poorer than urban areas, and the gap between extreme poverty in rural and urban areas has increased. The poorest rural areas in 2009 were in Hama, Deir Azzor and Daraa governorates, while the poorest urban area was in Hassakeh. These figures seem reasonable, given the drought taking place in eastern Syria between 2006 and 2009 and the subsequent displacement movement towards the south of the country, for example Daraa, the governorate where the civil movement started in March 2011.

The poverty profile in 2009 is similar to what was found in 2004. Poor households are bigger and younger than non-poor ones. The occupational profile indicates that the lack of work opportunities does not provide a sufficient explanation for the welfare status, since the employment rate among poor individuals is just two percentage points lower than for those who are not poor. Nevertheless, the findings show that poverty rate is lowest among people working in the public sector (12.8 per cent), and the highest among those working in the informal sector (18.6 per cent). It is also notable that poverty rates are the lowest among employers (8 per cent) and the highest among those who are unemployed and who never worked before (19 per cent).

The gap is clearer when it comes to educational attainment. 60.5 per cent of people living in poor families do not obtain any educational certificate, while this rate is 46.9 per cent among those living in non-poor families. The proportion of people with a secondary school certificate is twice as high in non-poor families as in poor families; the proportion with a university degree is six times higher. The situation is the same regarding the educational attainment of the heads of households: 16.8 per cent of non-poor households are headed by at least a secondary school certificate-holder, compared with 6 per cent of poor families.

The analysis is incomplete, however and there is room for future investigations. Exploring poverty correlates, for example, is key to understanding the reasons behind poverty and the dynamics of change among Syrian households. Further, one may build on these figures and link them geographically to the incidence and intensity of the current conflict either directly or indirectly. This may pave the way to solving the puzzle that the World Bank (2015) discussed regarding the coexistence of steady economic progress and consequent violence in many countries of the Middle East and North Africa.

References:

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