

Perceptions of Poverty between Food Secure and Food Insecure Households in Malawi

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Abstract: Poverty remains a global challenge, and the feasibility of achieving the first goal of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) which aims at eradicating poverty by 2030 may become farfetched if better approaches to dealing with this problem are not developed. Continued research on poverty is central to discovering more effective approaches of reducing and eradicating poverty. One approach to understanding poverty and dealing with it is to understand the underlying causes and even the subjective perceptions of households, especially those in poverty. This study addresses poverty perceptions from the eyes of food secure and food insecure households in Malawi. It follows the framework developed by Feagin (1975) also known as the Feagin scale which classifies perceptions into three factors, namely individual, structural and fatalistic domains. The research uses data collected from 501 households drawn from the eastern district of the city of Zomba in Malawi. The results of the regression analysis reveals that different categories of households perceive that poverty is linked to diverse causes. The main determinants of the perceptions of poverty that were statistically significant in the regression model were household size, food security status and the location (rural or urban) of the household. The results are important for approaching the compositions of intervention programs that should include civic education to develop a better understanding of the actual causes of poverty.

Keywords: Poverty, Perceptions; fatalistic; Structural, Individualistic

JEL Classification: I32

1. Introduction

Poverty remains a global challenge, which renders the likelihood of attaining Goal one of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of eradicating poverty by 2030 very improbable unless more effective initiatives of dealing with economic deprivation are developed. The World Bank (2018) report entitled “Piecing the Poverty Puzzle Together”, indicates that poverty remains high in sub-Saharan Africa, and the trend is not changing despite increases in the income of the poorest countries in the world. The efforts that have been put together in the past half-century

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to deal with poverty have yielded results in other areas and have failed in others. This brings to the fore the realisation that the experiences of poor people are not comparable, and hence their circumstances differ immensely leading to the need for a contextualised approach in dealing with poverty in different regions of the world. Continued research on poverty is essential then to discover better approaches to reducing and eradicating poverty.

One outcome of poverty that has dire negative consequences is food insecurity. Having access to food should be considered a human right, and extreme levels of poverty are associated with hunger, malnutrition and numerous diseases (Sen, 1981; Drimie & Casale, 2009; Daudi, 2010). However, poverty and food security are both complex concepts that are known to be multidimensional in nature. The World Bank (2000) defines poverty as deprivation from wellbeing. Wellbeing itself is a broad term, and hence the definition of the World bank in considering poverty as a deprivation of wellbeing encompasses deprivation of food, good health, housing and the ability to afford or access sources of income or incapability (Sen, 1981).

Developmental organisations overtime have observed that successful projects are those that are owned by the intended beneficiaries of such programs. The ownership of programs and projects results from a well-consulted process in the conception phase. Poverty programs that do not take into account what the poor consider to be important are a recipe for failure. Hence, understanding what most households consider as the causes of poverty becomes paramount to any successful undertaking in dealing with this phenomenon (Bradshaw, 2006).

Theoretically, perceptions of the causes of poverty are linked to the theories of poverty. The main categorisations of the theories of poverty are the conservative and liberal theories (Blank, 2003; Bradshaw, 2006). On the one hand, conservative theories such as the culture of poverty propagated by the likes of Oscar Lewis, view the poor as unredeemable (Lewis, 1963; 1966). On the other hand, liberal theories of poverty postulate that there are a myriad of reasons that do not entirely point to the poor themselves but rather other factors including the distribution and access to opportunities in society that place others at an advantage at the expense of others (Rowlingson, 2011; Dahl & Lochner, 2012; The International Bank for Reconstruction and Development 2016; The World Bank, 2018).

2. Literature Review on the Perceptions of Poverty

In establishing the importance of the perceptions of poverty, it is conceptually easier to show the linkage between perceptions and the theories of poverty themselves. In literature, the theories of poverty, which are a succinct attempt to explain the causes of poverty, are viewed from two main angles. First, there is a group of perspectives traditionally referred to as Conservative Theories of Poverty which attribute this

condition to individual deficiencies (Ryan, 1976; Schiller, 1989; Bradshaw, 2006). The second group takes cognisance beyond the individual and attributes poverty to broader social phenomena (liberal or progressive) (Bradshaw, 2006). Accordingly, while the Conservative approach attempts to explain the causes of poverty in an individualistic dimension, the liberal approach focuses on structural dimensions in society and how those interactions may explain the existence of poverty (Davids, 2010). However, there are other emerging explanations in addition to the traditional understanding of poverty. For instance, in a study by Clery, Lee and Kunz (2013) on the perceptions of poverty in the United Kingdom, although the usual themes of conservative and liberal thought were present, participants questioned the very definition of poverty and whether poverty as a concept in its current form applies to that country. As a result, there have been various attempts in literature involving studies conducted in Europe and Africa (e.g. Hall, Leary & Greevy, 2014; Koczan, 2016) intended to develop the understanding of the public perceptions of poverty and how best to deal with it in modern societies.

It is important to understand the intricate parts of the poverty conundrum, for its answers are beyond the traditional prescriptions of the last half-century. The World Bank (2018) recognises these complications and advocates that poverty has to be understood beyond the income threshold of the international poverty line of USD1.90 or any other figure that may be conceived (The World Bank, 2018). The report argues that there are many people living above the USD1.90 threshold who are still very poor by the standards of the society in which they live. Therefore, the definition of poverty to these people would be completely different from the international poverty datum line.

Another prevailing view is that the same criteria of dealing with poverty in its worse forms that work elsewhere are not working in other parts of the world. For instance, while sub-Saharan Africa is experiencing increased numbers of poor people even by the USD1.90 poverty datum line, other parts of the world including Asia have experienced a great reduction in the number of poor people (The World Bank, 2018). The definition of poverty is therefore fast becoming a contextual concept than it is a quantifiable income issue, hence understanding people's subjective perceptions of poverty and what they perceive to be the causes of the same, is principal in achieving the first sustainable development goal. However, if current trends are anything to go by, the 2030 target of the SDG 1 is likely going to be an unattainable target (United Nations, 2015).

The next section presents a review of some of the perceptions of poverty that have been used in the data analysis sections based on the data collected in Malawi.

2.1. Perceptions of Poverty

Advances in the understanding of poverty have continuously considered what those experiencing poverty and even those in proximity to poverty conceive it to be and

what they perceive to be its main causes or deprivation as is understood in other contexts. Based on the literature there are a number of perceptions on the causes of poverty. Most literature identifies four subjective perceptions of poverty namely individualistic, structural and fatalistic causes of poverty (Blank, 2003; Bradshaw, 2006; Davids, 2010; Grobler & Dunga, 2014). These are mostly considered in the light of the scale provided by Feagin (1975) in what is popularly known as the Feagin scoring scale.

2.1.1. Fatalistic Perceptions of Causes of Poverty

Fate which by definition entails occurrences that are beyond the control of an individual is considered as one of the main causes of poverty. People especially children who grow up to be adults that encountered fate in terms of the death of their parents or guardians while they were young may perceive that their situation is due to fate (Niemelä, 2008; Davids & Gows, 2013). The fatalistic perception, therefore, considers poverty as something that is beyond the control of an individual or society.

2.1.2. Individualistic Perceptions of Causes of Poverty

Emanating from the thought process that is characteristic of the conservative school of thought, the individualistic perception of causes of poverty points the finger to the poor themselves as responsible for their situation (Davids, 2010). Lewis (1963) argues that poor people are entrenched in a certain way of life that they don't really seem to desire an improvement in their life that would change that way of life. Lewis (1966) further argues that the poor fail to realise the cause of their problems and are always blaming society. It is commonly acknowledged that factors such as drug abuse, laziness and poor choices including teenage pregnancies/parenthood and pregnancies out of wedlock may contribute to lower educational achievements, leading to poverty (Shaw, Egan & Gillespie, 2007; Samarasinghe, 2009). There is adequate literature that shows a link between drug abuse especially alcohol abuse and poverty (Samarasinghe, 2009). In this way, the individualistic perception of poverty considers the poor as sufferers who should take some of the blame for their situation.

2.1.3. Structural Perceptions of Causes of Poverty

The structural perception of poverty looks at poverty as a consequence of social injustices that are promoted by social structures. The society is in this case blamed for having structures and processes that include others and excludes others in the distribution of resources (Larsson, Sjöborg & Institutionen, 2010; Rowlingson, 2011; Koczan, 2016). Inequality in access to education and any human capital processes is also associated with inequality in the ownership of factors of production, which leads to highly skewed income distribution and both absolute and relative poverty (Meyer & Sullivan, 2012; House, 2017).

3. Research Methodology

The study employed primary data collected from 501 households based in the eastern district of the city of Zomba, Malawi in the year 2017. A household questionnaire was developed and piloted, and subsequently used to collect the data from household heads in the study area. For measuring the three perceptions of poverty the study adopted Feagin's (1975) scale presented in Table 3.1. Questions relating to perceptions of poverty were incorporated into the questionnaire.

Initially, 550 questionnaires were distributed in the study area, and 550 were returned. From this number, 49 questionnaires had errors and were discarded in the data cleaning process, culminating in 501 questionnaires that were used in the final data analysis. To determine the sample size, the study followed the recommendation by Gujarati (2004) that for statistical purposes, especially when one applies the central limit theorem, any sample of 30 and above is considered large enough to perform basic statistical procedures. Some studies related to the current research (Sekhampu, 2013; Dunga & Grobler, 2017) employed similar sample sizes of 350 and 580, respectively and produced good results.

Households were selected randomly whereby a supervisor walked around the research area and selected every fourth house in the already designated Enumerator Areas (EAs) specified by the National Statistics of Malawi. This procedure was repeated until the required population was achieved. The survey was conducted by experienced enumerators who first received training on the relevant matters of interest. The respondents included households selected from both rural and urban areas, and data were collected either from the household heads.

3.1. Model Specification

The main aim of the study was to analyse the perceptions of poverty from food secure and food insecure households in Malawi. To achieve this aim, the study employed descriptive analyses, cross-tabulations and regression analysis. The expectation was that since Malawi has a high level of poverty rates as indicated by the International Monetary Fund [IMF] (2017) most of the households included in the sample were assumed to either be in poverty themselves or lived in proximity to impoverished households. Hence the responses would be informed by experience as opposed to speculation. Three indices were calculated based on the responses as regards to the perceptions of the causes of poverty. The perceptions were adopted from the existing scale (Feagin, 1975) that contains questions on individualistic perceptions, structural perceptions and fatalistic perceptions as the causes of poverty as presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Perceptions of poverty

Index	Reason for poverty
Individualistic	They lack the ability to manage money They waste their money on inappropriate items They do not seek to improve their lives
Structuralist	The society lacks social justice Distribution of wealth in the society is uneven They lack opportunities because they live in poor families They live in places where there are not many opportunities
Fatalistic	They have bad fate They lack luck They have encountered bad misfortunes They are not motivated because of welfare

Cross-tabulations were employed to compare the differences in poverty perceptions between food secure and food insecure households. A linear regression model was then applied to determine the perceptions of poverty from food secure and food insecure households. The study follows the approach similar to the one adopted in studies by Davids and Gouws (2013) as well as Dunga (2016) in which three regression models were run for each perception of poverty. The linear regression model was formulated as follows:

$$Index_i = \beta_0 + \beta_1 (H/H \text{ SIZE}) + \beta_2 (FOOD \text{ SECURITY STATUS}) + \beta_3 (NUMBER \text{ YRS SCHL}) + \beta_4 (LOCATION) + \beta_5 (GENDER)$$

The Indexes were: Structural for Regression 1, Individualistic for Regression 2 and Fatalistic for Regression 3. All three regression models employed the same independent variables defined as follows:

- HH size was the size of the head of household measured as the number of people per household;
- Food security status of household measured using the Household Food Security Scale (HFIAS) which is a categorical variable hence a dummy variable was created distinguished as 1 for food insecure and 0 for food secure;
- HH years of School was the household head's years of schooling, which was used as a measure of education level;
- Location was also a categorical variable, hence a dummy variable was created defined as 0- rural and 1- urban areas;
- Gender was another categorical variable, hence another dummy variable was created defined as 1 female 0 male;
- The parameter β_0 is the constant or intercept;

- β_{1-5} are the coefficients for the independent variables.

4. Results and Interpretation

Table 2 presents results for the descriptive analysis of categorical variables employed in the study. The first variable was the gender of household head, and the results show that males headed 64 per cent of the households in the study area while the remaining 36 per cent were female-headed. In the study, the place of residence is indicated as the location. The distribution of location indicates that 49 per cent of respondents lived in rural areas and 51 per cent in the urban areas during the time the survey was conducted. In terms of marital status, the results indicate that there were more married people (73%) as compared to the unmarried respondents (27%). These results indicated are consistent with the demographics of the whole country in terms of the stated variables as presented by National Statistics office Malawi (2018) in the fourth Household Integrated Survey (IHS4).

Table 2. Descriptive Analysis of Categorical variables

Factor	Categories	Frequency	Percentage
Gender household head	Male	321	64%
	Female	180	36%
Location	Urban	246	49%
	Rural	255	51%
Marital status	Married	366	73%
	not married	135	27%

Table 3 presents the results of the descriptive statistics for non-categorical variables in the study, some of which were later used as independent variables in the regression models. The results indicate that on average, the household heads had received seven years of education, which implies that most of them only had primary education. In terms of household size, the highest number of household size was 17 and the lowest.

Table 3. Descriptive statistics of the sampled households

Household variable	N	Min	Max	Mean	Standard deviation
Number yrs. school head	501	0	15	7	3.807
Household size	501	1	17	5.13	2.14
Age H/H	501	18	83	41	7.424
HFIAS Score	501	0	27	12	7.4

The food security status of households was another factor considered important to include in the descriptive analysis of the data, as it may also assist in explaining why certain households hold particular perceptions about the causes of poverty. The results are presented in Figure 1.

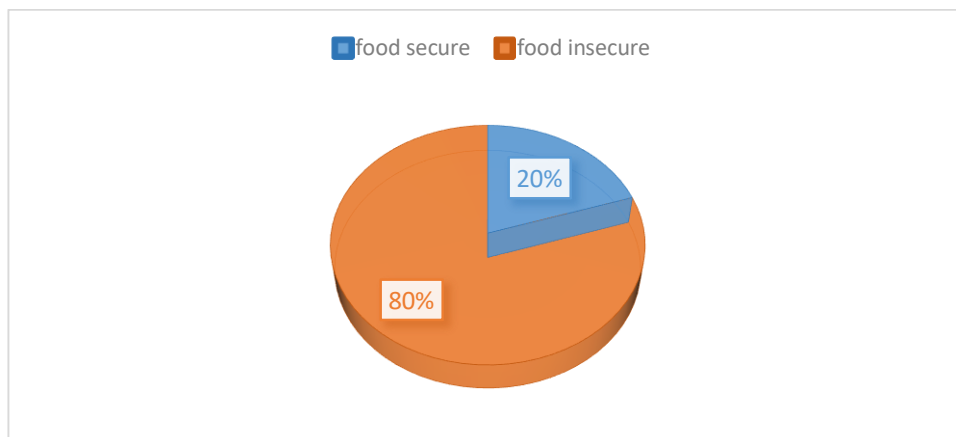


Figure 1. Distribution of household food security status

Figure 1 indicates the results of the food security status of households in the sampled area. It shows that 80 per cent of the households were food insecure while 20 per cent were food secure. The number of food-insecure households presented is very high by all standards, which prompted further analyses of how these households perceive the causes of poverty. These results are presented in the results of the regression analysis.

Table 4 presents the cross-tabulation results of the three perceptions of poverty and the food security status of households (food secure and food insecure households). The Chi-square test shows that there exist statistically significant differences between the food secure and food insecure households with regard to their perceptions of individual and structural causes of poverty. However, with regard to fatalistic perceptions, there were two areas (bad fate and bad luck) that were statistically insignificant. As shown under individualistic perceptions, a higher percentage of the food insecure respondents disagreed with the individualistic perception of poverty whereas most food-secure respondents concurred with it. Perhaps this result emanates from the view that since food insecure households are in poverty, they are unwilling to attribute their poverty to their own failures.

Further analyses of Table 4 reveal that there is a small difference under the food secure respondents between those who agreed and those who disagreed with the structuralist perception. Conversely, most of the food insecure respondents perceived that economic structures around their society are the leading cause of poverty amongst them. This result could be linked to the perception by the food insecure people that their poverty is not due to individual problems. Instead, they prefer to blame the government and the economic climate. Last of all, most of the food insecure respondents under the fatalistic perception, upheld that bad fate was another cause of poverty amongst them.

Table 4. Perceptions of poverty between food secure and food insecure households

Poverty Perception	Food Secure		Food Insecure		Chi-square test
	Disagree	Agree	Disagree	Agree	
Individualistic perception					
They lack the ability to manage money	19%	81%	75%	25%	.016*
They waste their money on inappropriate items	21%	79%	67.%	33%	.000*
They do not actively seek to improve their lives	41%	59%	74.%	26%	.008
They are exploited by rich people	42%	58%	68.%	32%	.009*
Structuralist perceptions					
The society lacks social justice	46%	54%	31%	69%	.000*
Distribution of wealth in the society is uneven	46%	54%	30%	70%	.000*
They lack opportunities because they live in poor families	46%	54%	40%	60%	.001*
They live in places where there are not many opportunities	45%	55%	43%	57%	.002*
Fatalistic perception					
They have bad fate	76%	24%	24%	76.%	.018**
They lack luck	67%	33%	28%	72%	.057***
They have encountered misfortunes	66%	34%	30%	70%	.179
They are not motivated because of welfare	45%	55%	40%	60%	.000*
They are born inferior	84%	16%	15%	85%	.265

Table 5 presents the results for the Ordinary Least Squares regression model in which three different types of regressions were employed to analyse the perceptions of poverty from food secure and insecure households. The regressions were conducted based on the three main perceptions of the causes of poverty, as advocated by Feagin (1975). An ordinary least squares regression was used since the perceptions were constructed into an index measured on a scale of measure as a continuous variable, where a lower score indicated “strongly disagree”, and a higher score “strongly agree”.

Table 5. Regression results on perceptions of poverty

Variable	Regression 1 Individualistic			Regression2 Structural			Regression 3 Fatalistic		
	β	T	Sig	β	T	Sig	β	t	Sig
Constant		15.032	.000*		15.081	.000*		8.14	.000*
Household size	-0.092	-2.064	.040**	0.152	3.394	.001*	0.125	2.663	.008*
Food security	-0.152	-3.171	.002*	0.05	1.014	0.001*	-0.092	-1.723	.086***
Educational level	0.87	1.67	.096***	0.091	2.039	.042**	0.103	1.95	.525
Location(urban)	0.169	3.208	.001*	-0.071	-0.345	0.73	0.035	0.635	0.526
Gender female	-0.079	-1.760	.079***	-0.016	-0.349	.727	.033	.721	.471

Household Size

Household size is the first independent variable in the three regressions. Using the individualistic index where high responses indicate the agreement with the perception that individuals are to blame for their circumstances, the regression results reported in Table5, show that household size had a negative coefficient (-0.092) and a significant p-value (0.04). This result depicts that larger households disagreed with the individualistic perceptions that place them in the blame for being poor. Using the same independent variable, on the structuralist perception of poverty the results show that household size had a positive coefficient (0.152) and significant p-value (0.001). This result illustrates that larger households ascribed their poverty to the economic structures that exist in society. This line of reasoning may stem from the view that large low-income families may have the best justification of getting more from the government because of their status. The regression for fatalistic perceptions was also significant ($p=0.08$) and had a positive coefficient of 0.125, which demonstrates that larger households also believed that fate could be another reason behind their poverty.

Food Security Status

Food security status was the second independent variable in the three regression models presenting results for food insecure households (dummy defined as 1 food insecure 0 food secure). Under individualistic perceptions, the variable was significant ($p=0.02$) at the five per cent level with a negative coefficient of -0.152. This result implies that food insecure households disagreed with the individualistic perception of poverty. This can be expected since in most cases food insecure households are most likely to be poor, hence they do not want to blame themselves for their poverty. The second regression of structuralist perceptions of poverty has a positive coefficient of 1.014 significant at the one per cent level ($p=0.02$). This result depicts that food insecure households are more inclined to structuralist rather than individualistic perceptions. This, in turn, portrays that they too, perceive that poverty is a result of the economic structures surrounding their society. The third regression of fatalistic perception of poverty shows a negative coefficient of -0.092 and a p-

value of 0.086, which signifies that food insecure households disagreed with the fatalistic perception of poverty.

Educational Level

Educational level was the third independent variable in the three regression models. The variable was described as the number of years of schooling. Under the individualistic perception, the variable shows a positive coefficient of 0.86 and p-value of 0.096, denoting that the factor was significant at the 10 per cent level. The positive coefficient indicates that households with more levels of education agreed with the individualistic perception of poverty. This disposition could be linked to their high levels of education and the benefits they have enjoyed from it, which lead them to perceive that poor and uneducated people deserve the blame. The structuralist perception also shows a positive coefficient of 2.039 and p-value of 0.042, which suggests that educated people also subscribed to it. This serves as evidence of the probability that the structures surrounding the poor may not be conducive enough for everyone to get the right education. Thus, escaping the poverty trap may be challenging for many in developing countries such as Malawi where educational infrastructure and facilities are inadequate. Under fatalistic perceptions, education level was statistically insignificant.

Location

Location was the third independent variable in the three regression models. Since the variable was categorical, a dummy was then created indicated as 0 for rural and 1 for urban dwellers. Individualistic perception indicates a positive coefficient of 0.169 and p-value of 0.001, which expresses that the location was significant at the one per cent level. The positive coefficient indicates that respondents in the urban areas agreed with the individualistic perception, which entails that the poor are to blame for their poverty. However, those in the rural areas disagreed with the perception. This train of thought could be connected to the view that most of the people in rural areas are poor, hence they avoid blaming themselves for their poverty. Location was an insignificant determinant in the other two regression models (structuralist and fatalistic).

Gender

Gender of household head was the last independent variable in the three regression models. Since the variable was categorical, a dummy was created indicated as 0 male and 1 female. In the first regression model under individualistic perception, the variable of female-headed households had a negative coefficient of -0.79 and a p-value of 0.079 which was significant at the ten per cent level. The negative coefficient shows that female-headed households disagreed with the individualistic perception of poverty. This line of thought could be linked to the view that female-headed households have in most cases been found to be poor (Dunga 2017) as

compared to their male counterparts. Hence, in this regard, they avoid ascribing their poverty to their own failures. Gender was not a significant determinant in the other two regression models (structuralist and fatalistic).

5. Conclusion

The study analysed the perceptions of poverty from food secure and food insecure households in Malawi. To achieve the main objective the paper adopted Feagin's (1975) scale which classified the perceptions into three different types, namely individualistic perceptions, structuralist perceptions and fatalistic perceptions. The study was conducted in the Southeastern region of Malawi and employed cross tabulations, descriptive analyses and linear regression models to classify the study populations' perceptions of poverty.

The results indicated that the majority of households in Eastern Malawi were food insecure. Cross-tabulations on the perceptions of poverty amongst the food secure and food secure indicated that according to the three perceptions, most people dispensed with the individualistic perception of poverty, as they felt that they were not to blame for their own poverty. The Cross tabulations also revealed that most households subscribed to the structuralist perception since they considered that unfavourable economic circumstances in their environments were the leading contributing factor to poverty. With regards to fatalistic perceptions, most food insecure households also attributed their poverty to bad fate.

The regression results indicated that gender, education level, household size and location of households contributed to the perceptions of poverty. The results indicated that most female-headed households, households with lower education levels, larger households and households from rural areas were more inclined to the structuralist perception than to the individualistic perceptions of poverty.

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