



Empowerment-forward Poverty Measurement: Real-Time Learning from the Arab Women's Enterprise Fund's Disadvantage Assessment

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Introduction

Funded by the U.K. Department for International Development and the Islamic Development Bank (IsDB), the Arab Women's Enterprise Fund (AWEF) takes a unique approach to economic development. Working across Jordan, Egypt, and the Occupied Palestinian Territories (oPT), AWEF blends market systems and empowerment thinking to stimulate women's economic empowerment. AWEF is the only market systems development programme in the region with women's economic empowerment as its core objective. It is implemented through a partnership between DAI Europe (DAI), MarketShare Associates (MSA) – a global consulting firm focused on bringing systems-thinking to development solutions – and Education for Employment (EFE), a nongovernmental organisation working throughout the Middle East and North Africa. AWEF seeks to reach 150,000 poor women over four years.

This learning brief captures AWEF's experience in developing an efficient poverty measurement tool that is gender-sensitive and empowerment-forward, which it has chosen to call the Disadvantage Assessment. Throughout the process, AWEF sought to push the boundaries of how it measures poverty – by being woman-focused, multidimensional, and context-specific. The authors note that such poverty measurement practices are nascent within the development industry. Therefore, the lessons and recommendations documented in this brief introduce an initial evidence base, while acknowledging the need for further testing and refinement across different contexts and programmes. Moreover, while the Disadvantage Assessment has been developed for all three AWEF country contexts, it has only been piloted in the Occupied Palestinian Territories (oPT). Further data from Jordan and Egypt is expected to provide additional and more nuanced understanding of the tool. As such, this brief is part of an iterative documentation process.

The purpose of this brief, which was published by AWEF's Learning Hub, is to generate knowledge and stimulate further discussion on poverty measurement practices in market systems programmes. It is specifically aimed at market systems practitioners who are grappling with best practices in poverty measurement. This brief is part of an iterative documentation process, whereby the brief will lead to a more comprehensive final report once the methodology is further tested by the programme.

Why Does Poverty Measurement Matter to Market Systems Development Programmes?

The core objective of the market systems approach is to change the way market systems interact with the poor so as to benefit the latter and consequently reduce poverty. As such, accurate poverty measurement is crucial to ensure that programmes' intended beneficiaries are identified and reached. It is particularly important for market systems programmes, given that they do not, by design, directly select their beneficiaries. Rather, market systems programmes partner with a diverse set of actors (e.g. firms, governments) within its target subsectors so as to reach their intended beneficiaries. This means that a programme like AWEF cannot specify to its partners, for example, whom they can hire or with whom they can work under the programme; it is a decision that partners will make based on their own needs. This is different to direct delivery programmes which can, for example, provide skills development programmes for select recipients, or subsidise employers to hire preferred candidates. Therefore, unlike direct delivery approaches, the market systems approach faces a unique challenge – how does a programme ensure that only the target beneficiaries (i.e. poor households or poor individuals), are counted as beneficiaries, even if it also affects other populations?

How is Poverty Currently Measured in Market Systems Programming?

Across many market development programmes, a monetary approach is often used to define and measure poverty. This is not unusual, given that money-metric definitions and measures of poverty are the most recognised. In fact, they are the basis by which official poverty rates are calculated on global and national levels. It is important to note

that there is no universally accepted definition of poverty. However, a money-metric approach is popular given that it allows for standardisation and consistency within and across countries, allowing for convenient comparison. Poverty is measured through household income or consumption indicators, which are then compared against a defined threshold (poverty line). If a household's income or consumption falls below this threshold, it and its household members are defined as "poor."

Given that collecting income and consumption-related data per household is a lengthy and expensive process, many programmes, including market systems programmes, widely use the Progress out of Poverty Index (PPI).¹ Developed by the Grameen Foundation, the PPI is a quick and cost-effective tool – comprised only of 10 questions – that allows the user to estimate the respondent household's likelihood of falling below various national and international poverty lines. PPIs have been developed for over 60 countries, and are calibrated based on each country's nationally representative household poverty studies. The PPI questions are often embedded into market systems programmes' research studies so as to build a poverty profile of the chosen sectors' target beneficiaries.

What Challenges did AWEF Face Using a Monetary Approach to Poverty?

Initially, AWEF attempted to use the PPI to measure the poverty levels of its intended beneficiaries – poor women. However, operationalising the monetary approach to poverty proved to be an uncomfortable exercise for the following reasons:

Firstly, the money-metric approach overlooks the fact that poverty is an intrinsically complex phenomenon. By focusing solely on income and consumption, it excludes a multitude of non-income related factors that can contribute to a person's lack of well-being. While money-metric measures are indeed useful, they are insufficient in capturing less tangible dimensions of poverty, such as poor health, lack of education, living conditions, disempowerment, etc. Particularly given AWEF's operational context in the Middle East, where complex socioeconomic dynamics have yet to secure women equal opportunities in their political and economic lives,² income poverty alone was deemed inadequate to capture the lived realities of the programme's women beneficiaries. Moreover, the criticisms toward money-metric measures of poverty are not new, as evidenced by the growing consensus that poverty research should be multidimensional, and that there should be further investments in developing new measures and metrics.³

Second, the money-metric method focuses on the household as the unit of analysis – which presupposes that all household members experience income poverty, or lack thereof, equally. This is misleading, since reality is comprised of unequal relationships and social stratifications that are influenced by, among others, social norms.⁴ For a WEE-centric programme like AWEF, it was unjustifiable to overlook intra-household gender dynamics by only measuring poverty at the household level. In other words, the incidence of women's poverty should not be conflated with that of their respective households.

Finally, the available PPI instruments for two of the AWEF programme countries, Egypt and Jordan, were last developed over a decade ago – which means that any poverty likelihood calculation would have to be based off

¹ Further information on the PPI can be found at: <http://www.progressoutofpoverty.org/>

² See World Bank (2013). Opening Doors: Gender Equality in the Middle East and North Africa. <http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/338381468279877854/Main-report>

³ Poverty Analysis Discussion Group (2012). Understanding poverty and wellbeing: a note on implications for research and policy. Overseas Development Institute (ODI). <https://www.odi.org/sites/odi.org.uk/files/odi-assets/publications-opinion-files/7654.pdf>

⁴ Markel, Erin; Gettliffe, Emilie; Jones, Linda; Miller, Emily; and Laura Kim (July 2016). *The social norms factor: How gendered social norms influence how we empower women in market systems development*. The BEAM Exchange,

outdated standards. Such a scenario would lead to an inaccurate estimation of poverty likelihoods, whether it be through over- or under-estimation.

Challenges Faced Using the Progress out of Poverty Index (PPI)

- 1) **The PPI's uni-dimensional focus on income poverty was inherently limiting.** While income, or lack thereof, is an important dimension of poverty, it excludes individual characteristics that cannot be transacted in markets, such as social and gender inequalities, health, nutrition, education, physical safety, justice and other freedoms and capabilities to improve one's life (Sen 1985).¹ For AWEF, it was important to understand how women specifically experienced poverty.
- 2) **The PPI does not measure poverty at the individual level.** This is because the PPI is calibrated based on nationally representative poverty studies that only measure poverty at the household level. This requires the assumption that all members of the household access household resources equally, which ignores intra-household dynamics. For a project like AWEF, whose unit of analysis is the individual poor woman, the use of the PPI would fail to properly measure the extent of her individual poverty.
- 3) **The PPI was significantly outdated for the programme context.** The available PPI instruments for Egypt and Jordan did not reflect the drastic socioeconomic changes that have occurred since they were developed. Utilising the PPI for Egypt and Jordan would mean calculating 2017 poverty likelihoods based on 2004/5 and 2006 standards, respectively, and therefore generating highly misleading data.²

¹ Sen, Amartya (1985). *Commodities and Capabilities*. Amsterdam: North-Holland; 1985.

² For example, the PPI for Egypt was developed based on the Household Income, Consumption and Expenditures (HICES) survey from 2004/5, and subsequently only updated for inflation in 2011. Similarly, the PPI for Jordan was developed based on the 2006 Household Income and Expenditure Survey (HIES).

What was AWEF's Solution?

After determining that the PPI would not be suitable in Egypt and Jordan, MarketShare Associates worked with AWEF to identify an alternative solution. MSA established criteria for an ideal tool, then identified existing poverty measurement methods using a literature and tool review. After finding that no existing tool fully met the criteria of being gender-sensitive, multidimensional, as well as ready and easy to administer, all three country teams decided to develop its own measurement tool that would fulfill the programme's criteria to the best extent possible.

Comparison of Disadvantage Assessment and PPI Results in Occupied Palestinian Territories (oPt)

In order to assess whether there were any correlations between the Disadvantage Assessment and the PPI, the same 44 maftoul processors at the Dura Cooperative who completed the Disadvantage Assessment were also administered the PPI questionnaire.

The PPI results showed that the mean poverty likelihood for the 44 respondents were 25% against the national poverty line, 57% against the 150% national poverty line, and 77.7% against the 200% national poverty line. This indicates that the respondents, as a whole, have a small likelihood of being monetarily poor. This is in large contrast to the results from the Disadvantage Assessment, which showed that they are deprived in multiple non-monetary dimensions. As expected, there was no statistically significant correlation found between the respondents' PPI poverty likelihood scores and their disadvantage assessment scores.

How was the Disadvantage Assessment Methodology and Tool Developed?

AWEF calls the tool a Disadvantage Assessment rather than a poverty assessment to highlight the tool's ability to capture the multi-dimensional and non-monetary aspects of poverty. This tool is one of the first gender-sensitive poverty measurement tools of its kind, and is also one that is quick to administer – 15 questions, easy to use and right-sized for efficient roll-out.

What makes the Disadvantaged Assessment tool unique?

- 1) Uses a multidimensional lens to poverty, including dimensions that are agency related.
- 2) Places the individual woman as the unit of analysis instead of the household
- 3) Reflects the highly context-specific nature of poverty in AWEF's target communities' due to the participatory approach to tool development
- 4) Administering the tool is quick and easy so it can be incorporated into baselines

The development of the Disadvantage Assessment drew inspiration from multiple sources, including a poverty and gender literature review for each country, local knowledge and expertise from AWEF country teams, and the Individual Deprivation Measure (IDM),⁵ which is the first gender-sensitive, multidimensional poverty measurement tool that focuses on the individual.

While the IDM was initially an option for AWEF, the tool is undergoing testing and will not be ready for global use until 2020. In addition, some of the existing IDM questions were not relevant to the Middle East context, and administering the instrument takes 60 minutes, making it too long to build it into AWEF's baseline studies. Rather, AWEF took all the dimensions presented in the IDM tool (including food, water, shelter, health, education, energy/fuel, sanitation, relationships, clothing, violence, family planning, environment, voice, time-use and work) as a foundation to develop context-specific indicators in each country. The tailoring and specification process was done through a participatory approach: AWEF conducted FGDs comprised of local women who were then asked to reach a consensus on the characteristics that define poverty for women in their communities. The outcomes from the FGDs were used to develop a right-sized tool to be used for the defined context.

AWEF's 10 STEP PROCESS

To develop the tool, AWEF followed a series of steps to ensure rigor and relevance to the programme context.

These included:

STEP 1: Conducting a literature review on gender and poverty in each of the three countries to understand the dynamics of poverty and women's access and agency.

STEP 2: Selecting a short list of dimensions for assessing disadvantage. Each country team prioritised the 5-6 dimensions that are considered to be the most important determinants of poverty. To make the process as fair as possible, each country team member was initially asked to complete a survey in which he or she would rank the dimensions presented by the IDM. The results of the survey, as well as findings from the literature review, were used to guide the team's decision-making process.

STEP 3: Developing potential definitions/indicators within each dimension. For example, if "Education Completed" was selected as a dimension, the AWEF team developed potential indicators by which to assess a woman's

⁵ Individual Deprivation Measure. <http://individualdeprivationmeasure.org/> 2017.

advantage/disadvantage within this dimension (such as “No education,” “Completed primary,” “Completed preparatory” and “Completed secondary or above”).

STEP 4: Selecting the appropriate language for discussion. Each country team agreed on the best language to use - in both English and Arabic - to discuss the concept of disadvantage, as well as each dimension and its components with FGD participants.

STEP 5: Creating vignettes or an imaginary profile of a woman on which to base FGD questions. Using the selected dimensions, each country team developed a context-specific profile of a woman on which to focus all of the questions during the FGD. As the topics of conversation were often sensitive, including discussing household and personal assets, intra-family decision making, and potentially even experiences of gender-based violence, the conversation needed to be conducted by referencing a third party rather than sharing personal experiences.

STEP 6: Developing research plans and FGD guides to structure the conversations and obtain the desired information.

STEP 7: Conducting FGDs with women, including those who were representative of AWEF’s beneficiaries in each of its sectors. In each country, FGD participants engaged in a structured discussion that focused on the prioritised dimensions. Afterwards, the categories were then weighted with the local women according to the perceived importance of each category as a determinant of disadvantage based on findings from the FGDs.

STEP 8: Constructing a survey instrument that included appropriate questions and response options for each of the weighted dimensions. The development of the questions, response options and each response option’s weight was determined internally by AWEF. The response option that exhibited the most disadvantage would be given a weight of 0, whereas the response option that exhibited no disadvantage would be given the highest weight determined for that dimension. Each response option and its corresponding weight were then categorised, again internally by AWEF, as to whether it belonged in one of four thresholds of “well-off”, “somewhat disadvantaged”, “disadvantaged” and “very disadvantaged.” The aggregation of these response options’ weights would determine the overall thresholds for each of the four levels.

Who joined the focus group discussions?

FGDs were comprised of 8-15 women who reflected the socio-economic status of women expected to benefit from AWEF interventions in each sector. FGD participants were women who were unlikely to benefit directly from AWEF interventions and who have not yet been contacted by AWEF or partners, in order to mitigate potential bias arising from incentives to embellish or minimise their perceptions of disadvantage. Additionally, facilitators made it clear to FGD organisers and participants ahead of time that the FGD will have no impact on programmatic or funding decisions, and that the objective is to understand women’s perception of disadvantage, as relates to women’s work, home situations, and other circumstances.

STEP 9: Embedding the finalised Disadvantage Assessment tool in each baseline survey, and administering it to respondents.

STEP 10: Analysing the scores for each respondent according to the four thresholds, which allowed the programme to create a disadvantage ratio per sub-sector. For AWEF, the proportion of those “well-off” compared to the others (those somewhat, fairly and very disadvantaged) was used as a discount rate to ensure accurate counting of beneficiaries. Moreover, the results were used to build a profile of the respondents, and determine what makes certain women more disadvantaged than others, as well as explore any correlations between disadvantage characteristics and outcome/impact baseline findings.

Lessons Learned

Given that the Disadvantage Assessment is a new initiative, AWEF is documenting its learning throughout the process. Below are some of the key initial learnings from developing and testing the tool across Jordan, Egypt and the oPT. As noted above, while the Disadvantage Assessment was developed for all three countries, it has thus far only been piloted in oPT. As data from the other countries becomes available, AWEF will update the brief and include these results as well.

1. It is important to develop guiding principles for determining which participants engage in the FGDs for designing the Disadvantage Assessment tool

One of the core principles of the Disadvantage Assessment was that it should be as context-specific as possible, so that it can take into account the different disadvantages that women in particular community's face. However, all countries - and even communities - are diverse and complex, and each AWEF country team had to make difficult decisions around how to structure and plan the design workshops. The women selected for the design workshops shaped the tool in a very significant way. Therefore, there were debates within the teams about whether there should be one disadvantage assessment per country, per governorate, per sector, or sub-sector. Moreover, there were discussions around how to account for the different experiences of women within specific geographic regions, cultural communities, ethnicity, and other intersectionalities.

Ultimately, several guiding principles were used. First, FGDs would be conducted with women from each sub-sector in which teams are working. Second, a diverse range of women (age, socioeconomic status, occupation, geographical location) would participate in the FGDs. The level of diversity and what was considered "enough" was uniquely decided by each country team. Third, FGDs would be conducted until AWEF felt that it was reaching data saturation or patterns in responses. As there is no one-size-fits-all approach to determining qualitative data saturation, the number of FGDs are likely to vary widely across contexts. Thus, setting guiding principles on how to identify participants in the design process ensures the level of diversity needed to be as representative of the target population as possible.

2. Subjective questions are necessary, but inevitably accompanied by response bias

In the process of developing the Disadvantage Assessment tool, AWEF had to design the appropriate questions and response options to represent disadvantage within each dimension. This step of the process required critical reflection, as there are multiple different questions and corresponding response options that could be chosen for any given dimension. While the FGDs were conducted to assist the team in specifying each dimension down to several sub-dimensions (for example, in the dimension of health access, sub-dimensions could include affordability and physical distance to a health facility), the team nonetheless still had to formulate questions and responses to specifically capture desired information for each sub-dimension.

The development of the questions required the team to use both objective and subjective questions. Objective questions focused on some dimensions such as one's education level or the condition of one's house, which in many ways, were straightforward and similar in structure to questions within the PPI. However, for some dimensions, objective questions were not feasible. For example, in a dimension like decision-making, when a respondent is asked who has control over certain decision-making issues within her household, the Disadvantage Assessment has to rely on her own assessment of her control. Similarly, the dimension on one's economic situation and the ability to afford basic household needs necessarily relies on the respondent's perception of her own economic situation. As such, the use of subjective questions is inevitably accompanied by the respondent's own bias.

3. Inherent challenges exist in aggregating multi-dimensional perspectives into a single overall score

One of the continued debates for AWEF and other multi-dimensional poverty tools has been how to aggregate multiple dimensions into a single overall score. Any aggregation presupposes that all dimensions are interchangeable, such that a person's higher score in one dimension would compensate for a shortfall in another dimension. A common criticism with multi-dimensional poverty indices is that they hide distinctions between dimensions when attempting to "mash" them up into a uni-dimensional space (Ravallion 2010).⁶

In light of this limitation, and to ensure that the composite score would somewhat reflect the distinctions across dimensions, AWEF weighted each dimension differently. The relative weights remained truthful to the votes provided by the design workshop participants. While this step does not fully resolve the issue of interchangeability and false compensation in scoring across dimensions, AWEF felt that this approach would enhance the tool's participatory legitimacy, as well as ensure that the relative importance of one dimension over another was not purely arbitrary.

4. Initial findings show that that the Disadvantage Assessment translates into a more inclusive beneficiary count during results measurement

The disadvantage assessment was designed to capture poverty through a gender-sensitive and multi-dimensional lens. Therefore, when determining the level of poverty amongst project beneficiaries for reporting purposes, initial findings show that the disadvantage assessment has allowed AWEF to include those women who may not have necessarily qualified under a uni-dimensional money-metric poverty measure. Results from the piloting in oPt validated this and is further explored in the text box below.

5. While the Disadvantage Assessment's unit of analysis is that of the individual, some dimensions could only be measured at the household level

Some dimensions in the disadvantage assessment are difficult to measure at the individual level. For example, one of the dimensions that came out strongly during the FGDs was a woman's household's economic situation, namely the ability to afford basic needs. Such a dimension was difficult to tease out amongst household members as it is conceptualised and determined on the household level. The same issue was also evident in the dimension regarding housing, including the type of tenancy – which, again, could not be differentiated amongst household members. In order to ensure that the overall tool focused on the individual, such household-related questions were kept to a minimum. All tools had a disproportionately higher number of individual-focused indicators.

⁶ Ravallion, M. (2010) *Mashup indices of development*. Policy Research Working Paper 5432. Washington, DC: World Bank. <http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/454791468329342000/Mashup-indices-of-development>

Case study: Administering the Disadvantage Assessment in the West Bank, Occupied Palestinian Territories

In OPT, the Disadvantage Assessment questions were embedded in the baseline questionnaire that was administered to 44 female *maftoul* processors who were part of the Dura Cooperative, Hebron Governorate, in the West Bank.

The Disadvantage Assessment included 14 questions addressing seven dimensions, including health status, health care access, family planning, household financial/economic situation, decision-making, experience of violence and time use. Each respondent's score (anywhere from 0 to 100) would place her in one of four disadvantage thresholds: very disadvantaged (0-27), disadvantaged (28-65), somewhat disadvantaged (66-85) and well-off (86-100). All respondents whose scores were equal to or less than 85 were counted as "disadvantaged", and therefore "poor."

The results showed that all 44 respondents were scored below the threshold of 86. The mean score was 63.4, and the median score was 64. Half of the respondents (n=22) were categorised as "disadvantaged" with a mean score of 55.6, whereas the other half (n=22) were categorised as "somewhat disadvantaged" with mean score of 71.8.

Interestingly, the level of disadvantage among respondents was correlated to their type of membership with the Dura Cooperative. For example, unsurprisingly, respondents who were contract workers for the Dura Cooperative were more disadvantaged than the board members of the Cooperative. Upon further investigation into the results, board members, in general, came from households with better economic situations, and had greater decision-making around their mobility, around major expenditures, around whether to work and what type of work to engage in, respectively.

In general, results revealed that these women are overall most disadvantaged in regard to their (1) time use in unpaid work, (2) decision-making around mobility (3) economic situation and (4) exposure to psychological violence, respectively. These results validate the findings from FGDs, in which the women participants ranked decision making, economic situation and violence emerged as most important indicators of disadvantage.

Moving Forward

This section focuses on what AWEF plans to do over the next year to validate and address existing questions with the tool. A few key items include:

1. Further test and validate the tool questions in each country

Moving forward, AWEF would like to conduct an extended field-test with the tool in each country to determine how well certain dimensions, sub-dimensions and their questions have fared in terms of their reliability and validity in comparison to others.

2. Further document results and understand whether and how the Disadvantage Assessment, by design, allows for a broader understanding of poverty and how the information can be used for programme design

The initial results, as mentioned above, show that the tool can capture a broader beneficiary base. Moving forward, AWEF seeks to analyse the data coming in from both Jordan and Egypt, and further understand the implications of applying the tool.

3. Explore the Disadvantage Assessment's ability to broaden how the project identifies sub-sectors and reaches women in non-traditional sectors

It is often the case during the market research phase of a project to select sectors and sub-sectors in which large numbers of income-poor individuals engage. The utilisation of a new tool like the Disadvantage Assessment can potentially inspire projects to explore sectors and sub-sectors that may have been traditionally ignored. For instance, in AWEF, the selection of a sector like ICT may not seem pro-poor, particularly if end beneficiaries tend to earn decent incomes. However, when approaching the ICT from a more multi-dimensional lens, it may show that potential end beneficiaries are disadvantaged in other dimensions in their life. AWEF will seek to explore this further and document the findings.

4. Test how the disadvantage assessment can be used as a component of initial market research to ensure that poverty measurement is fully embedded within the sector and sub-sector selection process

While the Disadvantage Assessment was initially designed as a poverty measurement tool to be used during the baseline data collection process, the resulting wealth of information showed that such data could be useful earlier in the project -- particularly during the inception phase. The Disadvantage Assessment would allow for any market systems projects to connect its poverty measurement practices with its upfront market research in a structured manner. Currently, across many market systems projects, this process remains ad hoc: a deeper exploration of what poverty looks like for end beneficiaries is often done following the selection of sectors. By using the disadvantage assessment combined with other market research tools during the market research phase, projects would be able to build an in-depth profile of their end beneficiaries beyond their roles within sectors and sub-sectors. By understanding the multiple factors that contribute to their disadvantage, projects can be better equipped to select and design WEE-tailored interventions.

5. Better understand the implications of weighting and union identification in determining dimensions and thresholds

The weighting/valuation across dimensions alone did not address the greater issue of trying to determine who is "multi-dimensionally poor." Indeed scholars of multidimensional poverty have proposed a variety of options. Thus far, AWEF has chosen to use 'union identification,' given that the teams felt that a disadvantage in any of the chosen dimensions would constitute poverty. That being said, in order to ensure that the project was not being overly inclusive, the tool also included a healthy buffer (i.e. a threshold of 85 or 90 out of a 100-point scale). That being said, within AWEF, conversations are ongoing in trying to determine how best to determine the appropriate levels of dimension-specific deprivation as well as how to determine the composite-wide thresholds for multi-dimensional poverty. AWEF seeks to continue these conversations and identify the most effective way for determining dimensions and thresholds.