

# Poverty and Life Quality: Objective, subjective and dynamic measures and interpretation based on household cases from Dinki, Amhara Region

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## Introduction<sup>2</sup>

There has tended to be a divide in understanding poverty between quantitative methods that focus on measurement and qualitative approaches that seek to portray the experiences of those living in poor countries and communities. This chapter is an outcome of the Wellbeing in Developing Countries Project (WeD) based at the University of Bath,<sup>3</sup> that sought to foster a dialogue between anthropologists, economists, psychologists and sociologists regarding the linkages between universal objective measures and subjective meanings of quality of life.<sup>4</sup> In Ethiopia the project focused on four rural and two urban sites<sup>5</sup> in which both survey and protocol-guided and case study research was carried out in 2004 and 2005.<sup>6</sup>

The data presented here is from one site Dinki, located in Ankobär *wäräda*, Northeastern Šäwa, Amhara Region, The site is situated in the lower reaches of the escarpment, and is relatively isolated because of a river even from the local town of Aləyu Amba. The site was

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<sup>2</sup> I wish to thank the following persons: Philippa Bevan who worked closely with me on the design and analysis, Damtew Yirgu and Tsega Melese who carried out the research and discussed their findings, John Hoddinott who identified households moving into poverty together with Stefan Dercon who improved the measurement of consumption patterns, Marleen Dekker who produced and shared the Resources and Needs Survey Asset Index, Yisak Tafere and Feleke Tadele for helping manage the research and Tom Lavers who helped in analyzing the data. Responsibility for the views expressed remain mine. I am grateful to the Economic and Social Research Council and the University of Bath Wellbeing in Developing Countries project under whose auspices the research was carried out. I should also like to thank the anonymous reviewer for useful comments.

<sup>3</sup> The WeD project involved research in Bangladesh, Thailand, Peru and Ethiopia from 2003 to 2007. For details on the overall project see: [www.welldev.org.uk](http://www.welldev.org.uk); for the Ethiopia research see: [www.wed-ethiopia.org](http://www.wed-ethiopia.org).

<sup>4</sup> For a discussion of the wider objectives and findings of the project see Gough and McGregor 2007.

<sup>5</sup> In 2004 exploratory research was carried out for a month in 20 rural sites. Four of these were selected for in-depth research in the two largest regions: Amhara and Oromia. In each of these one food-surplus and relatively integrated site and one remote, drought-prone and food deficit site were selected.

<sup>6</sup> A Resources and Needs Survey (RANS) was carried out among 250 households in each site including, in the rural sites, the panel households that the Ethiopian Rural Household Survey (ERHS) had been following since 1994. The in-depth research involved monthly diaries with 12 households and protocol guided thematic research over a period of 16 months carried out by a team of male and female researchers trained in social anthropology. For details see [www.wed-ethiopia.org](http://www.wed-ethiopia.org).

one selected by the International Food Policy Institute in 1989 for research on food insecurity, and was incorporated in the Ethiopian Rural Household Survey (ERHS) panel. The inhabitants include a slight majority of Muslim Argobba and the rest are Amhara including mainly Orthodox Christians. They face periodic drought and malaria, and are involved in mixed agriculture of cereals, pulses and livestock with some small-scale irrigation of mainly onions as a cash crop.<sup>7</sup>

Qualitatively rich studies of poverty and destitution in Ethiopia are rare (Aspen 2003, Yared 2002, 2003). Quantitative studies focus on objective data from macro or panel surveys (Dercon and Krishnan 1996, Tassew and Daniel 2002, Dercon 2004). There are few attempts to combine quantitative and qualitative data (Bevan and Bereket 1996, Sharp *et al.* 2003), or to compare objective measures with subjective self evaluations (Dercon and Hoddinott 2005). This chapter seeks to contribute by considering cultural constructions of destitution, and relating objective measures of land, livestock and other assets, to subjective self perceptions of comparative poverty, changing living standards and contentment dynamics among very poor household heads in the village of Dinki.

The first part of this chapter considers views of both wealthier and very poor households about destitution, and discusses the terms used and the ways in which the destitute are characterised by others and by themselves. The second part considers the dynamics that lead to deteriorations in objective conditions and subjective perceptions among the very poor between 1994 and 2004 based on descriptions of cases selected from the ERHS for 1994 and 2004 and the WeD 2004 Resources and Needs Survey (RANS) interviewed in mid 2005, using a module that included open-ended questions and graphs. Ten cases are presented including: 1) where objective and subjective wealth status had declined between 1994 and 2004, 2) cases of very poor households in 1994 to find out what happened to them, and 3) cases of very poor households in terms of land, livestock and assets in 2004 including those who viewed their subjective status as having changed and those who did not. The final part suggests empirical and methodological conclusions.

## **Cultural constructions and social realities of impoverishment<sup>8</sup>**

### **Terms used to refer to the destitute**

Five terms were used to refer to destitute persons. Three of these use adjectives qualifying the basic term for poor (*däha*). One of these

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<sup>7</sup> For details on Dinki see the Community Profile on [www.wed.ethiopia.org](http://www.wed.ethiopia.org).

<sup>8</sup> This section is based on the Elites and Destitutions module carried out in October 2004 in the six WeD sites. Male and female researchers first talked to knowledgeable informants with whom they had developed trust about who the destitute are, how they can be distinguished, whether the condition can be changed and inherited, what their survival strategies are, their relations with others and involvement in institutions. The two researchers each then held discussions with three to five persons who were identified as destitute. This summary is based on discussions in Dinki with four knowledgeable non-destitute informants, three female and one male, and seven 'destitutes', three male and four females.

expressions *bätam däha* or 'very poor' simply emphasizes extreme poverty. The second *yämäcärräša däha* or 'the last of the poor', i.e. the poorest of the poor, is relational in distinguishing the poorest from the poor. The third qualifying adjective *miskīn* deriving from the Arabic *miskīn* (Cowan 1976: 909), has a connotation of misery and wretchedness (Leslau 1976:24, Kane 1990:219) with the implication that others should feel sorry for them. The remaining two terms emphasise material indigence: *yatta*, literally 'lacking', refers to not having possessions and *mənəm yäləlläw*, 'one who has nothing' also highlights penury. None of the terms suggest that the destitute are conceived of as a category apart or that they are socially ostracised; the Amharic usage of the term *miskīn* does not seem to have the Arabic connotation of submissiveness and servility but rather of deserving pity and hence assistance.

In discussing the situation in Wällo the *Destitution in Ethiopia's Northeastern Highlands* study (Sharp *et al.* 2003:11-2) found five terms that qualify the term *däha*, including two of those mentioned above: *yämäcärräša däha*, and *mənəm yäləlläw*. The authors include other terms such as *čəggärtäñña*, 'those with problems', *som adari* 'those who spend the night fasting', i.e. go to bed hungry, and *wəha anfari* 'those who cook water'. The authors suggested that three elements: inability to meet basic needs, lack of assets and dependence on others recur frequently. They inferred that some terms imply being on the last or the bottom level of society and others suggest reaching the end of one's resources and habitual hunger. They also concluded that the destitute were seen as extremely poor rather than categorically different, and as being on the bottom of a sliding scale of poverty into which anyone may fall at some time<sup>9</sup>.

### **Characterisations of the destitute by others**

Both male and female respondents described the destitute firstly in terms of what they lacked, notably having no livestock ('not even a hen'), no land or very little, sometimes referred to as *yädakuman märet*, literally 'land of the tired' i.e. weak or feeble (Kane 1990:1816). They were also said to have no money, and insufficient food, lacking *yälät qurs*, literally 'daily breakfast', or basic food. They therefore faced uncertainty regarding daily subsistence and often went hungry, had less meals, or sometimes made do with *qolo* 'roasted cereals'. They were said all to have a house but which was small, shabby, or in poor condition. They were also said to lack even basic assets.

The poor were distinguished from the destitute since they had at least some assets, land, and animals and were assured of daily food. One woman, Gete, suggested that the poor produce the food they eat from their own land whereas the destitute do not.

In addition to material lackings respondents mentioned poor health, long term illness, and old age as common attributes of the destitute. These were also noted by Sharp *et al.* (2003). In relational terms the destitute were characterised as 'lacking helpers', often being single or living with just a spouse, although Gete mentioned that they

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<sup>9</sup> This may be an explanation behind the way in which beggars are sometimes referred to as *yäne bite* literally 'someone like me' (Kane 1990:945).

could also 'live with [too] many children'. They also could not afford to join *əddər* 'funeral associations' though local traditions of charity provide them with burial services. Regarding how they became destitute, one of the men, Ahmād, suggested that it could be through ill health or laziness but that it could also happen despite hard work and efforts.

In terms of what they did to survive the destitute were said often to be *muyatāñña* 'daily labourers' working for the wealthy rather than on their own account. They also sold firewood to earn money, the men were involved in weaving and women in spinning. During times of severe drought farmers who are not destitute and do not engage in weaving at other times may turn to weaving as a survival strategy as happened in 1984-5. The destitute rely heavily on others. Ahmād suggested that they borrow grain, money and other necessities from neighbours and relatives. Gete mentioned that they had to pay high interest on borrowed money, and relied on help from relatives or the wealthy. Mulatwa emphasised that they could work for the wealthy only if they were healthy. Ayäläč stressed that since they had little land they could not work and produce efficiently and could not have a good quality of life. However, they were not perceived as socially set apart or marginalised.

In terms of their attitudes to life they were said to experience hopelessness and not believe that they could escape poverty. Asked whether destitution was inherited, Ahmād suggested that this was not always the case as a labourer's children may manage to improve their lives, and some people were able to escape poverty through remittances sent by children working abroad. Likewise, Gete suggested that they could improve their conditions but only if they were not very sick or too old. However, Ayäläč said that destitution was often inherited.

### **Self-characterisations of the destitute**

Among the three men and four women who were approached as being among the destitute all recognised that they were among the poorest and some even described themselves as 'the poorest', and believed they were known as such. 'Everybody knows I am the poorest' as Sitti put it. All three men and one of the women were elderly, in their sixties in the case of the men and the woman in her seventies. One man and one woman were living entirely on their own, two men were living only with their wife, one woman was living with her husband only, another only with her children and the third with her father, brother and small child.

All of the destitute had a house, though these were small. Most did not have much land beyond the house plot. Mahmud had a little plot of land that a relative gave him and Abba Muga lived with a wife he married recently living on her land. Mulunäš worked on her father's land and lived with him. None of the destitute had livestock, 'not even a hen' as several of them put it.

All the destitute said they faced food shortages and several mentioned health problems. Zahara mentioned sometimes not having food all day whereas Fatuma said she usually ate twice a day. Mulunäš said she did not eat every day and sometimes had to survive on just

roasted grain.<sup>10</sup> Fatuma mentioned that she lacked money to go to the health centre when feeling ill, and worried who would take care of her when she became very sick. Mulunäš pointed out that her clothes were very old.

In terms of the survival strategies weaving, daily labour and firewood collection for sale were important. Abbabu depended on weaving since his health is not good enough for agricultural work and Abba Muga also weaved. Mahmud worked as a daily labourer, exchanged his labour to get oxen service and also collected and sold firewood. Abbabu was exempted from community work due to illness. Among the women Zahara only worked in the house and relied on her husband who worked for others. She did domestic work, fetching water, and sometimes went to market. Fatuma used to spin cotton to earn money but is now too old and her eyesight is not good enough to do so. Mulunäš worked on her father land.

The destitute men had all been relatively well off previously and all three have suffered from ill health. Abbabu's mother was a landlord with a lot of land. After the revolution most of the land was taken but he was left with a small amount. However, even that was taken since he and his mother were too ill to cultivate it and pay the tax. Mahmud was involved in trade, living in Mätahara, but when he fell ill came to live in Dinki where a relative gave him a plot and has since been living there in poverty. Abba Muga had land during the Därg and a good family life. Things went wrong for him when his best friend ran off with his wife taking much of his property too. He has been very unhappy and said he still feels the pain of humiliation, although he has remarried recently.

The destitute did not express a sense of being deliberately excluded, ostracised and isolated. They are too poor to join *əddər*, but said they would receive burial services. The two Christian women belonged to a Maryam *māhabär*, and the two Muslim women drank coffee on the first of the month with neighbours. They borrowed tools and food from neighbours, socialised with them and some obtained support when needed from relatives. Sitti said: 'Everybody feels sorry for me and supports me'. Fatuma mentioned neighbours giving her cereals after the harvest. Mahmud borrowed grain from friends and lenders, entering agreements to repay in kind after the harvest, at a rate of double the amount borrowed.

Regarding their aspirations, among the women Zahara said she hoped to get land and enough food to survive. Mulunäš aspired to get her own land to improve her life. Sitti said she prayed to Allah to give her a better life, and give her family good health. Likewise, Fatuma prayed for daily food and health to work hard. Among the men Abbabu said he had no aspirations to change his life, and expressed a sense of hopelessness. Mahmud aspired to gain more land through *mägazo* share-cropping arrangements, if Allah keeps him in good health, and Abba Muga said he prayed to Allah to help him get money, hoping his life might change.

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<sup>10</sup> Reducing meals amounts and frequency is common in times of food shortage (Pankhurst and Bevan 2004).

## **Poverty dynamics: objective and subjective data and interpretation<sup>11</sup>**

The following section considers objective data on material poverty in terms of land, livestock and assets in relation to subjective assessments by informants of their relative ranking within the community, their relative status compared with five years earlier and one year earlier and with their father at the same age, and in relation to their subjective views of their standard of living expressed in their Standard of Living Graph (SLG)<sup>12</sup> and their life satisfaction as recorded in their Global Happiness Score (GHS)<sup>13</sup> and their Contentment Graph (CG).<sup>14</sup>

The ten cases considered include: 1) two whose status declined between 1994 and 2004, 2) two of the poorest in 1994, 3) two who were poor in 2004 but considered that their status had changed significantly since the past five years, 4) two who were poor in 2004 but considered that their status had not changed, 5) one who was poor in 2004 in terms of assets, 6) one that was rich in 2004 in assets but poor in land and livestock, and 7) one that was poor in 2004 yet considered himself to be happy.

### **Households that moved into poverty between 1994-2004**

Two households were interviewed among six identified as having moved down significantly<sup>15</sup> between the 1994 and 2004 ERHS in terms of three measures: consumption,<sup>16</sup> livestock<sup>17</sup> and self-perception.<sup>18</sup> One of these

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<sup>11</sup> This section is based on two poverty dynamics modules carried out in June and July 2005. The first involved 20 households selected from five types of households: 1) whose objective and subjective wealth status changed between 1994 and 2004, 2) who were at the wealth extremes in 1994, 3) whose perceived RANS wealth category in 2004 differed markedly from their current perception of their status five years earlier, 4) whose perceived wealth category in the RANS is the same as their perceived status five years earlier, and 5) whose perceived RANS wealth category is at odds with their perceived happiness. The second module considered six households, three from the wealthiest and three from the poorest in terms of assets. This discussion considers only ten cases among the poorer households in Dinki.

<sup>12</sup> The SLG was used to place the household on a scale of 7 categories from the richest to the poorest and records the household status in the imperial, Därg and EPRDF periods with a focus on the last ten years.

<sup>13</sup> The GHS was a measure used in the RANS to record the household's head's perception of the household's happiness with three scores: 1 = very happy; 2 = fairly happy, and 3 = not too happy.

<sup>14</sup> The CG was used to plot changes in the household's contentment over the past ten years on a scale of 1 to 10.

<sup>15</sup> For consumption and livestock a decrease of 15 percent or more was considered; for self-perception a household was described as moving into poverty if it reported being better off 10 years ago, but reported being currently poor. i.e., you perceived yourself to be, ten years ago, very rich, rich, or comfortable and now you see yourself as never quite having enough, being poor or destitute.

<sup>16</sup> The definition of Dercon and Hoddinott is as follows: 'Consumption is defined as the sum of values of all food items, including purchased meals and non-investment non-food items. The latter are interpreted in a limited way, so that contributions for durables and non-durables, as well as health and education expenditures are excluded. Although there are good conceptual reasons for including use values for durables or housing, we do not do so here; the heterogeneity in terms of age and quality of durables owned by our respondents, together with the near complete absence of a rental market for housing

can be considered as being among 'the very poor' (071) in terms of objective indicators of land and livestock and the other (025) among 'the poor'. In terms of self-evaluation on a seven category scale from the richest to the poorest, the former identified herself as 'the poorest' and the latter viewed himself as 'a little poorer than most'.

**Case 1: Elderly widow:** Household 071 was composed of a single elderly widow aged 72. She married her first husband 50 years ago and had one son, but got divorced after three years. She lived with her second husband for more than 30 years and they were happy despite not having children. Her household was among the richest in the imperial period and was rich during the Därg, but their status has declined since the death of her second husband, when their land was taken. Her house burnt down in the late Därg period, and she lost all her assets. She married a third husband who died after eight years. Her only son died two years ago and his children did not help her. She had no land or livestock. She claimed to be 'much worse' off than five years ago and than one year ago. The SLG shows a decline over the three regimes, dropping to 'the poorest' during the EPRDF period and declining further within that category over the past ten years. Her CG also declined drastically from 6 to 1 out of 10, though her GHS was average at 2 or 'fairly happy'.

The household was clearly among the poorest without land and livestock and low on the Asset Index. All the measures are consistent in expressing a decline in standard of living. The woman suggested that the decline was due to the death of her husband, loss of assets and ageing. The SLG does not suggest a drastic drop in living standards in the past ten years, but the CG shows declining contentment from just under average to just above rock bottom which is consistent with the description, and is in line with the objective indicators. However, the GHS of 2 or 'fairly happy' is surprising and out of tune with the subjective indicators of decline in the RANS, and the clear sense of declining satisfaction expressed in the CG.

**Case 2: Elderly male headed household:** Household 025 comprised three members whose male head was 80, his wife aged 50 and a grandson aged 6. The household was formed 30 years ago and they only had one daughter. The household had 1.5 hectare of land, none of which was irrigated, and they had only a cow and calf. The head saw his household as 'a little worse' than five years ago, and 'the same' as one year ago, but 'poorer' than his father. The SLG suggested that the household was poorer than most during the Därg, with a slight decrease in the EPRDF period, until the last three years when there was a further decline to 'a little poorer than most' ending at the top of the 'among the poorest' category in 2005. The CG remained constantly well above average till 2001, and declined sharply to well below average reaching 3 out of 10 in the past two years. The GHS score was 1 or 'very happy'. The elderly household head had not been healthy, and was a religious teacher giving out his land to sharecroppers. He lost his hearing 15 years earlier and his sight five years ago.

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would make the calculation of use values highly arbitrary. Because comparisons of productive and consumer durable holdings between 1994 and 2004 show rising holdings of these durables and comparisons of school enrollment data show significant increases in enrollment, *ceteris paribus*, our consumption estimates may understate the actual increases in household welfare.'

<sup>17</sup> Livestock were measure in terms of household self reports of the value of all animals owned by the household.

<sup>18</sup> John Hoddinott worked out lists of households that have moved into and out of poverty between the two ERHS surveys, and used the improved comparison of consumption data by Stefan Dercon in the selection.

The household was in the poorer category, notably in terms of livestock and assets. The head's view of the household as 'a little poorer than most' seemed accurate. In terms of change, the ERHS data showed a decline on all three counts, and the RANS self assessment likewise stated some decrease, and the SLG also suggested a gradual decline, particularly in the past three years. The contrast between the SLG which shows only a minor drop and the CG which shows a dramatic drop illustrates the depressing effect of ageing with consequent disability. The GHS top score is out of tune with this picture, and suggests that the measure did not pick up the clear depression of the head with loss of his hearing and sight.

### ***Interpretation***

Considering the above two cases what accounts for the decline noted in the objective and most of the subjective data? Both cases suggest that ageing of the household head with consequent inability to work, and compounding disabilities of loss of eyesight and hearing in the case of the man, were major factors in their decline. In the case of the woman the death of her husband led to land confiscation, and her house burning led to loss of assets, suggesting that she suffered from a series of compounding misfortunes. The lack of children to support them, with the male head's only daughter leaving, and the female head's only son dying are also important factors. The GHS provides limited information and may be misleading as the woman had the middle score of 'fairly happy' and the man the top score of 'very happy'. The graphs of living standard and contentment present a more accurate picture and suggest one should be wary of such a general global score which may be misleading and does not capture poverty dynamics. The contrast between the SLG which shows a gradual drop and the CG which shows a dramatic drop illustrates the depressing effect of ageing with consequent disability, even if the living standard may not have declined dramatically.

### **Poorest households in 1994: what happened to them?**

The two households interviewed were selected for being among the poorest in 1994 ERHS in order to consider what had happened to them by 2004. Both may be considered to be in the 'very poor' category in objective material terms, and both are female headed. In terms of self perceptions one of them (084) saw herself as 'a little poorer than most' in 2004, whereas the other (069) placed herself 'among the poorest' in 2004, and also saw herself as 'poorer than her father'.

**Case 3: Divorced woman:** Household 084 comprised 3 members; the head was a woman aged 50, living with her niece and granddaughter. She came to Dinki with poor parents when she was three, was married at 15 and got divorced after six years having had a son. She lived alone for two years then married her second husband who was a soldier who went away soon after. She waited for him for five years, heard that he had died (and mourned his death), but found out he had remarried elsewhere. She lived with her third husband for four years before divorcing him and had lived on her own for the past eight years. She had been engaged in daily labour and as a forest guard. Her niece came to live with her to work as a labourer but then left to get married, and her granddaughter came to live with her from 2001. She had 0.63 hectare of land which she had to give to sharecroppers and a shared cow and goat. She had slightly improved her

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livelihood from planting onions. Her son was not supportive but she had good relations with a neighbour who became her son's godfather.

The household was clearly poor in terms of land, livestock and assets. The self perception in the RANS did not place the household right at the bottom but as 'a little poorer the most'. The ERHS data showed an improvement in terms of consumption and perception, but not livestock. The household owned part of a cow and goat which might explain the livestock increase. The SLG suggested a slight improvement during the Därg, but remaining at the same level during the past ten years. The RANS subjective response also suggested no change in the past five years and in the last year. This is at odds with the ERHS objective evidence of improvement. The CG was very high and constant, thought the GHS was average at 'fairly happy'. The sense one gets is of a woman who despite being very poor feels she has managed to improve her life a little and is fairly content. The ERHS and the SLG seem to concur on improvement, though the latter suggests an improvement earlier, whereas the RANS subjective score suggests no change.

**Case 4: Elderly woman:** Household 069 comprised 3 members, headed by a woman aged 80, living with two grandsons. She came from a middle-wealthy household; her father was a religious leader who married her off to one of his disciples. When her husband died she did not remarry. She relied on a son who established his own household. She had only 0.5 hectare of land, which she gave out to sharecroppers and her only livestock were six chickens. She saw herself as 'among the poorest', and also as 'the same as last year'. However, she considered herself to be but 'much worse' than five years ago and also 'poorer than her father'. Her GHS score was 3 or 'not too happy'.

The household is clearly poor, with little land, only chickens as livestock, and a low asset rank. The head also categorized the household as 'among the poorest' which seems a fair portrayal. In terms of change, the ERHS comparison found a marked decline in terms of consumption and perception, but not livestock. This might be because the household did not have much livestock in any case. The RANS comparison with five years ago suggested that the household was 'much worse', though it was 'the same' as a year ago. The SLG decline from 'about average' in imperial and Därg times to 'among the poorest' in the EPRDF period fits with the objective data. The contentment decline from average to very low (5 to 1) and then remaining constant suggests that the ageing process has affected the household recently. The GHS of 3 or 'unhappy' may also relate to suffering from ageing, loss of hearing and sight. The objective and subjective data concur and the standard of living and contentment show similar trends.

### ***Interpretation***

The two households discussed above are both headed by women and both very poor. However, whereas one *improved* in the EHRs comparison in terms of consumption and perception but not livestock, the other *declined* in terms of consumption and perception but not livestock. The woman whose household seems to have improved did obtain good income from onions on sharecropped land but she did not suggest an improvement in the RANS. The woman whose household declined was extremely old and

had lost her sight and hearing; she also had given out her little land to sharecroppers. She saw herself as much worse off than five years ago and the same as one year ago. A major difference between the two therefore seems to be ageing and disability. The younger woman was able to work for wage labour and had good relations with her neighbours. Although she did not acknowledge improvement in her self assessment she placed herself as 'a little poorer than most' rather than 'among the poorest'. In contrast the older woman saw herself as 'among the poorest' and 'much worse off' than five years ago, with a sharp decline in contentment.

**Poor households in 2004 whose status changed significantly**

The two households interviewed were very poor households that recorded in the RANS that their status had changed significantly, in one case improving and in the other declining since five years ago. In the RANS both ranked themselves as 'the poorest'. The head of household 042 claimed to be 'much better' off than five years ago but 'the same' as one year ago. The head of household 074 claimed to be 'much worse' than five years ago and than one year ago. However, household 042 was found to have moved *into* poverty in the ERHS comparison whereas household 074 was not in the ERHS sample. Both consider themselves to be 'poorer than their father'.

**Case 5: Poor young man:** Household 042 consisted of a single young man aged 21 whose father died eight years ago and whose mother left with his siblings to live with her brother. One sister who married away came back to live with him. He had 0.75 hectare of land, some of which was irrigated. His livestock consisted of three goats and a chicken. The household was found to be 'much better' off than five years ago, and 'the same' as a year ago. Despite a subjective improvement in the RANS, in the ERHS comparison the household was found to have moved *into* poverty in terms of perception and consumption but not livestock. The head worked for wage labour and to get oxen.

This household was formed after the death of the head and disintegration of the parental household. The household was very poor in terms of livestock and its asset ranking. The head placed it as 'the poorest'. The head and his sister were involved in wage labour. The disintegration of the household makes it difficult to assess changes. The ERHS suggest a move into poverty in terms of perception and consumption, but not livestock. However, this is based on the household prior to the head's death. The current livestock (only three goats and a chicken) make the household very poor. The only contentment measure was the GHS which gave the low score. From the interviews it is clear that the sister was unhappy with her brother, who she saw as lazy, and relations between them did not seem to be good. Both the head and his sister were struggling, working for others to make ends meet. The case illustrates how the death of the head can lead to fragmentation of the household and impoverishment. The difference between the low GHS and ERHS decline on the one hand and the RANS subjective sense of improvement may be related to the head's sense of becoming independent.

**Case 6: Poor elderly woman:** Household 074 was composed of a single female head aged 69. The household was established 30 years ago. The woman came from an average land owning family in the imperial period, and retained an average status during the Därg. The woman's daughter left her to live with her father in 1992. Her land was

confiscated by the *Qäbäle* in 1996 and she has appealed without success. She had no livestock. The SLG placed her as 'richer than most' in imperial and Därg periods, declining to about average in the early EPRDF period, and gradually moving over the past ten years into the 'among the poorest' category. She had her cow and calf stolen in 1997. Her granddaughter left her five years ago and her son lives far away.

This elderly woman was clearly among the poorest, without land or livestock and at the bottom of the asset index. She suggested that she was 'much worse' off than five years earlier and than one year ago, but did not appear in the ERHS comparison between 1994 and 2004, possibly because she was already poor, had no livestock and low consumption. Whereas the SLG shows a gradual decline to the poorest, which agrees with the objective data, the CG shows a sudden decline when her granddaughter left, but does not continue declining below 3, suggesting that even the poorest might not have rock bottom contentment. Perhaps unsurprisingly the GHS was 3 or 'not so happy', which fits with her sense of loneliness. She explained the decline in her fortunes in terms of growing old and lacking any kin to help. She also said that people were malicious towards her, and that her unsuccessful land litigation had been a drain on her strength and wealth.

### ***Interpretation***

In considering the above two cases who claimed retrospectively that their status had changed, the household of the young man was found to have declined in objective terms in the ERHS after his father's death and the disintegration of the household. His subjective sense of *improvement* despite being very poor and the objective decline may be related to his having become independent. The old woman lived on her own, without land, livestock or kin. Her land was confiscated, her livestock stolen and her granddaughter left her. Her contentment score was in the lowest category. Her contentment graph showed a steep drop when her granddaughter left revealing the impact of lack of help and loneliness. However, the graph did not reach rock bottom suggesting that she is not desperately unhappy.

### **Poor household in 2004 whose status had not changed**

The following poor household was selected for having stated in the RANS that there was 'no change' in the household's fortunes since five years earlier.

**Case 7: Poor elderly man:** Household 066 was composed of a single man aged 60. His father had been a rich landlord with tenants. He had land during the Därg but returned most of it when he became ill and was unable to pay taxes. He had 0.5 hectare of land and no livestock. He was living with his ageing mother until she died in 2001, and thereafter became destitute, giving his land out to sharecroppers. The RANS self-assessment suggested that the household had remained poor, though the SLG showed a drop from 'the richest' in imperial times, to 'about average' in the early Därg period, another drop to 'poorer than most' in the late Därg period, a further drop to 'among the poorest' in the early EPRDF period and a gradual decline over the past ten years to 'the poorest' category. His contentment over the past ten years was below average at 4 out of 10 dropping gradually to 3. His GHS score was 3 or 'not too happy'.

The household is clearly among the poorest without livestock and very little land, which was given out to sharecroppers. His standard of living declined gradually from the richest to the poorest and his contentment was low and declined over the past decade. His disability, lack of assets, having to look after an ageing, blind mother and being alone after her death, all contributed to his unhappiness, reflected in the bottom GHS score.

***Interpretation***

The household head claimed that there was no recent change. However, over the longer term the SLG suggests that he has experienced a slow decline since imperial times and a further decline into destitution recently. This suggests that a graph may provide a better sense of the dynamics and longer term change than a question about retrospective assessment of change over a short period of five years or a simple happiness question.

**Household among the poorest in 2004 in terms of assets**

This case was selected for being among the poorest in the Asset Index. The household head emphasised that without oxen he could not prosper. However, since he had basic agricultural tools he was able to engage in wage labour, which may be the first step out of poverty.

**Case 8: Poor young man:** Household 023 had three members: a man aged 18, his wife also aged 18 and their 3 year old daughter. He set up his own household 15 years ago, divorced after two years and returned to his father's household. He remarried but his second wife's illness led to a further divorce. He married his current wife six years ago. He had a hectare of land. His livestock included 1 cow and 1 bull but no oxen. His assets included an axe, a sickle, a spade, a plough, a bed, cutlery, crockery, pots, a jerry can and a mat. The head ranked the household as 'among the poorest', which may be fairly accurate. The household declined significantly according to the ERHS objective data, but not the self assessment. The head viewed the household as being 'the same as five years ago' but 'much better' than a year ago. The SLG showed a fall from average during the Därg to 'the poorest' in the early EPRDF period and a slight improvement to 'a little poorer than most' in 2000, and a further improvement in the last couple of years. His contentment in the CG dropped at the time of his divorce and rose sharply with his remarriage.

The household seems to be fairly poor without irrigated land, little livestock, and a very low asset rank. Without oxen, he cannot plough his land on time. He hoped his young calf would become an ox soon. However, he mentioned some improvement due to good harvests, involvement in daily labour, and the cow that his new hard-working wife brought, and her income from spinning cotton.

***Interpretation***

Despite limited assets and a decline according to the objective data, the household head suggested that there was no change since five years ago and even a significant improvement in the last year, and the SLG shows an improvement in the last two years. The CG showed big changes, with a decrease to a very low point at the time of his divorce and the period when he was living alone, with a steady rise to almost the top of the scale. This case clearly illustrates the depressing nature of divorce and

living alone and the importance of cohesive spousal relations for economic improvement and happiness. Although this household was still a little poorer than most the household head's happiness had soared after his latest remarriage. The improvement recently which might not have been registered in the ERHS and the very high contentment might explain why this household did not see itself as moving into poverty in terms of self perception. However, the middle Happiness Score does not do justice to the significant improvement noticeable in the Contentment Graph.

#### **Asset rich but livestock and land poor household in 2004**

The following household was selected as being asset rich, though its limited land and livestock actually place it among the very poor.

**Case 9: Young poor man:** Household 190 had 3 members, headed by a man aged 20, with a wife aged 16 and a baby daughter. He was a former domestic labourer in a rich household and set up his own household only in 2004. He had only 0.37 hectare of land and no livestock. In terms of assets he had 2 axes, 1 hoe, 2 sickles, a bed, cutlery, crockery, a kettle, pots, a jerry can, a mat, and a necklace. He noted that he needed the tools to work as a daily labourer; and his wife spun cotton for sale; however, he lacked a plough and oxen that he considered the most basic assets. He placed himself as 'a little poorer than most'. He considered himself 'a lot poorer' than his father, but was unable to judge in comparison with five years ago as he was then a house servant. However, he saw himself as better off than a year ago. The SLG showed a decline under the Därg, and a rise to 'richer than most' over the past ten years till 2004 when it dropped again to 'among the poorest' and further to 'the poorest' in 2005. The CG was not filled for the period while he was a servant but is at the top of the scale at 10 in the past two years.

The household was poor in terms of land and had no livestock, though it seemed to be rich in terms of assets. The view of him being in the 'richer than most' category is misleading as this represented his masters' wealth status. The drop from 2004 to 2005 to poorest might relate to his wife being pregnant and unable to work and the fact that he had to borrow oxen and buy grain.

#### ***Interpretation***

Given the key importance of ploughing this case might suggest that an asset index should be weighted, and needs to consider land, access to irrigation and livestock, and distinguish between productive and other assets. This case also clearly shows how someone at the bottom of the standard of living scale can be at the top of the contentment scale. The household head is very happy at having set up his own household and his wife giving birth. However, the middle happiness score does not pick up on this high contentment.

#### **Poor yet happy in 2004**

This case is somewhat exceptional as a poor household with a 'very happy' GHS. It is noteworthy that none of the very poor nor any of the others in the poor category had this top happiness score.

**Case 10: poor young man:** Household 056 had five members headed by a man aged 20, with a wife and three sisters. The family members were living with his father who was described as a drunkard and careless resulting in their facing food shortages. His

mother divorced his father and came to live with her brother taking the children with her. When her brother died his mother inherited the land. However, she herself died two years ago. The younger sisters went back to live with their father, but three sisters stayed with their brother who got married and became the household head. The household had 1.5 hectare of land, none of which was irrigated. The main livestock was a bull. The household was categorised as poor whereas the household head ranked his household as 'among the poorest' and 'much worse' off than five years ago and 'a little worse' off than a year ago, as well as poorer than his father. The SLG showed a decline from about average until 2003 and a sharp drop to the poorest in 2004. However, the head mentioned that things were getting better as they had enough land and some livestock. The CG showed a drop from average right down to a score of 1. In stark contrast, however, the GHS was 'very happy'.

This household's status had declined after the break-up of the household following the parents' divorce and death of the father. The mother converted to Islam (which her son who remained Christian was not happy about), and she took the children to her brother's house. Further shocks were the death of the brother followed by the mother's death. However, despite their poverty the household head is young, has some inherited assets, has married and has the help of sisters.

### ***Interpretation***

The household head expressed a perception of decline in living standards after the disintegration of the household, with however, with some recent improvement. He portrayed his sense of contentment as dropping from average to low, perhaps reflecting grieving over the mother's death, from which he said the younger children were still suffering. The contrasting high happiness score may reflect the head's contentment with his recent marriage and a hopeful outlook given inherited assets and a good labour profile.

### **Conclusions**

The discussion of terms used to describe the very poor suggests that the destitute are seen as merely being extremely poor, rather than different or separate from the rest of society. Characterisations of the destitute by others and by themselves were broadly similar. They lacked livestock and basic assets, having no land or very little, often limited to the household plot, they faced food shortages and reduced meals. They had a house, which, however, was small and in poor condition. They often suffered from poor health, chronic illness, notably loss of hearing and eyesight often associated with ageing. They tended to live on their own or only with a spouse, lacking helpers. Though they were unable to afford to join *əddər* funeral associations, they were not deliberately excluded from social institutions. The Christian women were part of *māhabār* religious associations and the Muslim women were part of neighbourhood coffee groups. Some worked as daily labourers, others collected and sold firewood; some men were involved in weaving and women in spinning to earn income. They relied heavily on neighbours, kin and friends and borrowed food, utensils, and grain, sometimes having to pay back double in kind after the harvest.

The most significant difference between the views of the non-destitute and their own self-perceptions related to their attitudes. Whereas many of the non-destitute thought the destitute experienced hopelessness and did not believe they could escape poverty, most of the destitute hoped to improve their lives notably by obtaining more land. Some prayed for food, health to work hard, or money to change their lives.

In considering poverty dynamics, factors involved in decline included ageing, disability, notably loss of hearing and eyesight, shocks such as their house burning, theft of assets, notably livestock, and for widows having their land confiscated after their husband's death. Loss of support due to children or grandchildren leaving was also mentioned by the elderly. Many of the destitute are elderly women and the contrast with a younger poor female-headed household whose condition was improving highlights the problem of ageing.

However, an analysis of factors leading to destitution in isolation can miss combinations of factors, oversimplify complex processes, and overlook the actors' subjective rationalisations. Death of parents leading to family splitting and consequently resulting in decline in living standards brings out this point most clearly. Despite poverty a high contentment was expressed by young newly-established household heads reflecting satisfaction at becoming independent and setting up their own household, whereas the elderly seemed more prone to dissatisfaction.

Subjective measures of contentment may also be more a reflection of social relations notably marriage and divorce; poor young men who have married and had children seem to express high contentment. Subjective views of contentment, though clearly interlinked with material conditions may thus be somewhat independent from subjective standard of living assessments and objective factors and may be subject to greater fluctuations relating to life events.

In methodological terms the experience of this exploratory study suggests that Standard of Living and Contentment Graphs provide a richer and more dynamic picture than one-off measures such as the Global Happiness Score which only allows for three scores and may reflect mood or the view at the interview time. Graphs may also provide a better sense of intermediate change than retrospective questions comparing the household's status with five years ago, or comparing self assessments at intervals. However, even the graphs require interpretation and the explanations mainly came from the open-ended discussion that can provide a better sense of the processes involved. The Standard of Living Graph considered changes over three regimes, and can provide a sense of longer term change which can complement questions about comparisons with the parental generation. The findings also suggest the need for caution in using unweighted asset indices that do not include land and livestock, and the need to concentrate on key productive assets.

The approach explored in this study could be improved through a more interactive discussion with respondents using a combination of methods involving panel objective and subjective data, along with graphs and timelines, and discussion with the respondents of their reasons for giving certain scores, and a discussion between researchers and respondents of how the timelines and graphs are to be constructed and

interpreted. This could provide better insights into the respondents' lives and household histories over longer periods of time taking account of household development cycles, key events and shocks to understand the extent to which destitution is inherited, and the processes and means by which households can be locked into or move out of poverty.

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