

Introduction

Changing perspectives on poverty and inequality: The contributions of the *International Labour Review*

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Abstract. *This introduction presents a selection of articles from the International Labour Review that illustrate how research on poverty and inequality has evolved over the past century. Receiving only occasional attention in the early decades of the journal's history, these topics acquired more prominence in articles published from the 1970s onwards, especially in relation to research carried out under the ILO's World Employment Programme. In the 1990s, articles looked into concepts of poverty and social exclusion and the impact of economic reform. More recent publications have treated economic and social inequality within wider analyses of growth and development. Scope remains for closer integration of different approaches to poverty and inequality.*

Keywords: *poverty, inequality, social exclusion, economic development, employment, income distribution, basic needs, discrimination.*

Poverty and inequality are different notions, but they are intertwined. Poverty is often understood in absolute terms, but is better viewed as failure to reach some minimum standard of living, set in the light of the possibilities and priorities of the society in question. In this sense, poverty is relative, and but one aspect of social and economic inequality. Inequality in turn has many facets, involving not only differences in income and wealth, but also disparities in status, access and opportunity. Poverty is only one of the many consequences of inequality, but unequal societies are more vulnerable to poverty.

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Although interconnected, these two concepts have followed different trajectories in the history of the *International Labour Review* (ILR). In some sense, a concern with inequality underlies much of the ILO's work. After all, the unequal distribution of value between capital and labour lay behind the social movements of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and, in their wake, the creation of the ILO. A fairer distribution of the benefits of work is a central element in the overriding goal of social justice. But, in the early years after the ILR's creation in 1921, one looks in vain among its pages for a systematic analysis of the mechanisms driving inequality. And yet these were the times of the "robber barons", when the shares in income and wealth of the richest in society were at historic highs in Europe and the United States of America,¹ to say nothing of the inequality between the colonial powers and the populations of their colonies. Inequality diminished somewhat between the two world wars, but it was only after the Second World War that a decisive shift towards greater equality occurred.

Insofar as inequality was on the agenda of the ILR during its early years, it mainly concerned the design of institutions and the formulation of policies to promote the interests of workers and prevent injustices, to reduce disadvantages and to outlaw exploitation – topics that were addressed in many articles. However, one article, published in 1936, examined the broader question of income inequality. It was written by Ursula Hicks (1936), one of a number of prominent economists working at the Universities of Oxford and Cambridge and at the London School of Economics who transformed economic thinking between the 1930s and the 1950s. A specialist in public finance, Hicks investigated how fiscal policy and social expenditure in Great Britain modified the overall distribution of income in the 1920s and early 1930s, concluding that there was "a slightly greater movement towards the equalisation of incomes than in any previous period" and that this had helped to stabilize the economy (Hicks, 615). Her article has a very modern feel. But almost 30 years passed before the topic was developed further in the ILR.

The story with poverty was different. The ILO's 1944 Declaration of Philadelphia proclaimed that "poverty anywhere constitutes a danger to prosperity everywhere".² This powerful rhetoric is interesting for several reasons. One is that, if treated as a statement of fact, it is patently untrue. Poverty and prosperity have always coexisted; indeed, it can readily be argued that the prosperity of some is frequently built on the poverty of others. More to the point for the collection of ILR articles in this Centenary Issue, poverty as such was largely absent from the ILO's preoccupations in the first decades of its existence, and this was reflected in the subjects treated in the ILR. During this period, there was a strong academic current of work on poverty, which developed the concept and measured its incidence. For instance, Rowntree's famous

¹ Documented in some detail by Piketty (2014).

² ILO, Declaration Concerning the Aims and Purposes of the International Labour Organisation (Declaration of Philadelphia), adopted in Philadelphia, PA, 10 May 1944 (appended to the ILO Constitution in 1946), part I (c).

studies of poverty in York are widely cited.³ But although Rowntree himself published an article in the ILR in the first year of its existence (Rowntree 1921), the subject was not poverty but unemployment compensation. Of course, unemployment was an important cause of poverty, so unemployment compensation could be a valuable element of an anti-poverty policy. But, as with the treatment of inequality, attention focused on particular levers of change, such as improvements in safety and health, conditions of work or the minimum wage, rather than on the problem of poverty itself.

In fact, the route to a wider preoccupation with poverty passed through the development of social security. The focus of the ILO's interwar work was on social insurance, which, by its contributory and employment-linked nature, hardly reached the mass of the poor. It was distinguished from "poor relief", which was regarded as a form of charity. But over time, and especially through the Great Depression of the 1930s, support for a wider concept of social security grew, including non-contributory social assistance that would provide a direct means of addressing the needs of poor households.⁴ A key article was published in the ILR in 1941 by Oswald Stein, Chief of the ILO's Social Insurance Section, which laid out this wider view (Stein 1941) – a perspective that was then embedded in the Declaration of Philadelphia.

Nevertheless, this did not bring the analysis of poverty into the mainstream of the ILR. Indeed, the topic remained peripheral, even in articles concerned with social security, until the ILO started to engage with development issues, especially from the 1960s onwards. The same was broadly true of work on inequality.

The inflexion point was the launch of the World Employment Programme (WEP) in 1969. In practice, the concerns of the WEP went far beyond employment. In its early years, a series of major country missions proposed broad development strategies within which action to reduce poverty and inequality was a central focus. Alongside these missions, a large programme of research addressed a series of topics, among them income distribution. In 1973, the ILR published a wide-ranging review of patterns of income distribution and development by Felix Paukert, who headed the ILO's research programme on income distribution and employment (Paukert 1973). He was following up the pioneering work on income distribution by Simon Kuznets, who had compiled national data on inequality in the 1950s and 1960s from a number of countries, and suggested a pattern in which inequality first rose and then fell in the course of economic development.⁵ Paukert's article documented and discussed this proposition further and extended the empirical base, providing a reference for much subsequent work on the subject.

The ILO's income distribution research programme also explored the structural determinants and consequences of inequality in development. An

³ Rowntree (1901), based on a survey of poor households in York in 1899, followed by a re-survey in the 1930s (and another in the 1950s).

⁴ For a discussion of this process, see the chapter on social protection in Rodgers et al. (2009, 139–170).

⁵ See Kuznets (1955) and later writings by the same author.

ILR article by Jacques Lecaillon and Dimitrios Germidis (1976) reviewed different aspects of inequality in several francophone African countries and studied how they were embedded in economic structure. Lecaillon was Professor of Economics at the University of Paris I, and Germidis was Professor at the Institut d'études du développement économique et social (IEDES) at the same university. They looked at income differentials between urban and rural areas and the implications for migration, differentials between formal and informal work, and differentials between economic sectors. They considered the implications for savings and investment and argued that income distribution objectives could and should be incorporated in development planning.

The reduction of poverty was a constant theme in the work of the WEP, but it took a particular form after the endorsement by the 1976 World Employment Conference of the “basic needs” strategy (ILO 1976). In practice, achieving basic needs amounted to eliminating poverty, on the basis of a broad, multidimensional concept that extended beyond food and shelter to a variety of other needs, including education, health and social participation.

Many articles in the ILR developed this concept or applied it to national development policy in the years after the World Employment Conference. No single article captures the breadth of this research, but a piece by Glen Sheehan and Mike [Michael] Hopkins (1978) – two members of a large group of young researchers hired to work on the analytical foundations of the WEP – made a pioneering effort to bring together global data on the state of basic needs satisfaction around the world, differences between countries and regions, and trends and various key determinants.

The focus on basic needs gradually faded from the scene in the 1980s, but the work of the WEP in this period gave rise to many publications on the impact of social and economic policies and relationships on poverty, employment and inequality. Assefa Bequele and Rolf [Rolph] van der Hoeven (1980), also members of the WEP research team, examined the reasons for the persistence and, in some countries, increase of poverty and inequality in sub-Saharan Africa. Low economic growth was only part of the story. The unbalanced structure of African economies, still conditioned by their colonial past, remained a major source of inequality, reinforced by biases against the poor in public policy, notably in public investment, education, health and technology.

Rodgers (1983) explored the relationship between population growth, inequality and poverty. The ILO had a long history of interest in the consequences that population growth had for work and welfare. This interest dated back at least to Colin Clark's (1953) ILR article expressing an optimistic view of the world's ability to achieve high living standards for a larger population. The 1983 article, which drew on a WEP research programme on population and employment, explored whether high rates of population growth were likely to lead to greater inequality, because of their impact on labour supply, land use, savings and investment, and public services. This is a common view, but a cross-country analysis did not provide much support for the proposition that lower population growth leads to lower inequality and long-term benefits for the poor. Inequality is embedded in production systems, and, although

population growth may play a role in the transformation of production relations, structural inequalities cannot be addressed through population policies. However, there was evidence that, if policies to reduce inequality are successful, they may well result in lower population growth.

Rizwanul Islam, who headed the WEP Asian Regional Team for Employment Promotion in New Delhi, provided a broader view on the relationship between macroeconomic policy and performance and rural poverty in Asia (Islam 1990). Success in reducing rural poverty had varied greatly among Asian countries, and, although high growth helped, it was by no means sufficient. Growth had to be associated with employment creation, and a policy focus on poverty was needed. Growth in agricultural output reduced rural poverty only when measures were taken to include small farmers and protect wage workers. Rural industrialization played only a small role, except in China, and urban industrialization, especially through import substitution, generated few jobs and had little indirect effect on rural poverty.

At the end of the 1980s, the collapse of the socialist system in Eastern Europe opened up a new concern – poverty in what soon ceased to be the Soviet Union. The situation was dramatic at the beginning of the 1990s, when real incomes collapsed in the face of supply disruptions and increasing prices, leading to a rapid spread of extreme poverty. Natalia Tchernina, a researcher at the Institute of Economics and Engineering in Novosibirsk, analysed the situation in detail (Tchernina 1994). Economic reforms had undermined the existing sources of income, both through employment and through state provisioning. In the summer of 1992, between 33 and 40 per cent of the population in Russia was estimated to be living below the poverty line, particularly persons aged over 55, unskilled workers, agricultural workers, persons without high levels of education, women in almost all occupational categories, scientists and social service workers. Tchernina examined the consequences of the sudden demise of a labour system in which employment had been guaranteed, and poverty almost invisible, and she highlighted the vulnerabilities of different groups to unemployment and poverty in the new labour market.

Meanwhile, new approaches to the concept of poverty itself were emerging. The notion of social exclusion, with roots in the French sociological literature, was adopted by the European Commission as the basis for its poverty programme in the 1980s. A project at the International Institute for Labour Studies explored this idea further, with particular reference to its application in developing countries. Within this project, an important contribution to thinking came from work by Hilary Silver, a Professor of Sociology at Brown University. In her 1994 article in the ILR, Silver mapped out a theoretical framework for the interpretation of social exclusion in different societies, identifying three paradigms – “ideal types” in the sociological sense – which drew on the patterns observed in different countries: “solidarity”, in which a central “republican” model dominates social discourse and exclusion occurs when the bond of solidarity is broken; “specialization”, reflecting an individualistic, liberal social order in which there are plural groups and diverse patterns of inclusion and exclusion; and “monopoly”, in which exclusion arises

from the interplay of class, status and political power and serves the interests of the included. Within each of these paradigms, the connection of exclusion with poverty, and indeed the content of poverty, is different. Silver explored the forms of economic exclusion that lead to poverty, inequality and deprivation in each of them: through the weakness of social ties and community institutions in the case of solidarity; through the workings of the market and exclusion from social insurance under specialization; and through structural segmentations under monopoly.

This frame of analysis has important implications for the examination of welfare systems and social policy, since their effectiveness depends on their congruence with the sources of exclusion; indeed, their design depends on how the connection between society and its citizens is conceived. The International Institute for Labour Studies' project also contributed to debate at the 1995 World Summit for Social Development, which chose social inclusion, along with full employment and the elimination of poverty, as goals for the world community. Nevertheless, social inclusion is not exactly the mirror image of social exclusion, and this approach had only a limited impact on subsequent ILO work.

Another important article that was published in the same ILR issue as Silver's was by Peter Lee and Peter Townsend, respectively researcher and Professor of Social Policy at the University of Bristol (Lee and Townsend 1994). Townsend was one of the leading figures in the analysis of poverty in the United Kingdom. His 1979 book, *Poverty in the United Kingdom*, has become a standard reference on the subject. In his earlier work, he also developed the concept of "multiple deprivation" to characterize poverty situations. He himself regarded this vocabulary as a euphemism for a class analysis, but it has much in common with other multidimensional approaches to poverty, including the basic needs approach. Lee and Townsend's article is important because it documents and analyses what happened to the poor in the labour market in London during the peak years of the neoliberal revolution under Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher. It was based on two surveys of the same households, one carried out in 1985/86, and the second in 1991/92. These surveys were used to examine the changing status of the low paid and the unemployed. The authors documented a move away from full-time employment: of men into early retirement, disability, unemployment and part-time employment; and of women into unpaid work at home, early retirement and part-time work. Income inequality increased and the authors argued that the dominant trend was one of polarization and deepening deprivation.

In the ILR articles on exclusion and deprivation, both poverty and inequality are necessarily part of the same frame of analysis, and the same is true of an article by Amartya Sen from 1997. This is one of several articles he has contributed to the ILR over the years. Sen, who was Professor of Economics at Harvard University at the time and would receive the Nobel Prize in Economics the following year, had had a long association with the ILO. His work on poverty and famines (Sen 1981) was published under the auspices of the ILO, and he also contributed to the research on technology and development

under the WEP. He has written extensively on inequality. The article included in this Centenary Issue is a reflection on the meaning of inequality, which exists in many different spaces (Sen 1997). The distribution of income is only one aspect of economic inequality – there is unequal vulnerability to unemployment, for instance – and Sen also considered inequality in health and political participation, among other issues. He examined in more detail the deprivations and exclusions associated with rampant unemployment and explored the available policy options, discussing why they were perceived differently in Europe and the United States.

In 2007, Tony Atkinson published an article in the ILR on earnings inequality in countries of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). Atkinson, Professor of Economics at the London School of Economics and Senior Research Fellow at Nuffield College, Oxford University, was one of the leading writers on economic inequality for over 40 years. His book *Inequality: What Can Be Done?* (Atkinson 2015) is a classic of cogent empirical analysis in this domain. In his 2007 article, he set out to explain why earnings inequality had been rising in OECD countries. He critically considered the “consensus” in the literature that this follows, on the one hand, from globalization, as unskilled workers in high-income countries are exposed to global competition, and, on the other hand, from technological change that favours demand for skilled workers. Using data from a dozen countries, he found that patterns of change in the dispersion of earnings varied, but the most consistent trend was an increase in the share of top wage earners. He argued that this reflects both a change in pay norms in hierarchical organizations (the ratio between the top earnings and the rest has increased) and an increase in the share of incomes received by “superstars” (Atkinson 2007, 57–58) in different domains, who benefit from shifts in technology and global trade that concentrate benefits among a minority of workers.

The concern with inequality has in recent years been increasingly embedded in a wider analysis of growth and development, and this can be seen in the two final articles included in this Centenary Issue. The first is concerned with the pattern of growth and transformation in China (Lu and Gao 2011). Ming Lu, Professor of Economics at Fudan University, Shanghai, and Hong Gao, a PhD candidate at the same university, made the changing pattern of income distribution an integral part of their analysis. Income inequality rose in China between 1980 and at least 2008, including both an increase in the gap between urban and rural wages, and greater dispersion of urban wages. The authors argued that this, in large measure, reflects a labour reform in the direction of a more liberalized labour market that tended to keep wages low with a view to maintaining export competitiveness. Since productivity rose faster than wages, the wage share fell. The authors identified a variety of likely adverse consequences, including slower growth of domestic consumption and higher poverty. The important point here is that the pattern and trend of inequality condition the path of growth and development as a whole.

The final article, by Germán Alarco (2016), is also based on the premise that the pattern of growth and development is intimately associated with the

distribution of income. Alarco is a Research Professor at the Postgraduate School of the Universidad del Pacífico in Lima and has also occupied senior policy positions in the Government of Peru. His article examines the long-run pattern of growth in Latin America using the work of the French Regulation School as a point of departure.⁶ For the regulationists, the pattern of inequality, and in particular the share of wages and profits, is a characteristic of a growth regime, itself built on a process of capital accumulation and conditioned by the interaction among the social institutions that manage labour relations, finance, competition and the role of the State. Alarco focused on the share of wages, exploring whether Latin American economies were wage led or profit led, with clear implications for the distribution of the benefits from growth. Although this article is based on a theoretical and empirical framework that is different from that of the article on China, there are some elements in common; Lu and Gao (2011) implicitly argued that there was a need to shift towards a wage-led growth regime in China. Alarco estimated a model of growth and distribution for 16 Latin American economies and found that most, but not all, had had mainly wage-led economic growth regimes, suggesting that policies that increase the wage share will be conducive to economic growth.

In the course of the ILR's century, attitudes to and research on poverty and inequality have changed radically. Although there was a strand of research on these issues in the early decades, its importance expanded greatly with the emergence of the development agenda in the 1960s and 1970s. Much of the development literature focused on poverty rather than inequality, backed by the notion that inequality would inevitably rise in the initial phases of economic development, but that poverty would be alleviated by "trickle-down", and inequality would eventually fall. However, the body of research reported in the ILR was at variance with this view, for many articles also examined patterns of inequality, or treated inequality and poverty together, as a joint problem. Nevertheless, poverty dominated the international agenda until the 1990s.

However, as evidence accumulated that inequality was growing, with no sign of an automatic reversal to a more equitable pattern of growth, concern about inequality intensified. The trend was at first masked in global statistics by rising incomes in China and India, but the creation of systematic databases made it possible to identify widespread tendencies of increasing income dispersion within countries, declining wage shares and, above all, the capture of the benefits of growth by a small fraction of the population – the top decile or even the top 1 per cent. And it became more widely recognized that the whole pattern of global production, and its contribution to human goals, was structured by the unequal distribution of the benefits. In some sense, attention shifted from poverty, at the bottom of the distribution – where the problem was far from solved but clear progress had been made in absolute terms in many parts of the world – to the distortions of global and national economies that resulted from an unequal pattern of distribution and the concentration of income and wealth at the top.

⁶ See, for example, Boyer (2015).

This shift of focus relied on the work of many institutions and authors, including the United Nations University World Institute for Development Economics Research (UNU-WIDER) and the World Inequality Database; Tony Atkinson and Amartya Sen, who have articles in this Centenary Issue; Thomas Piketty, whose two major volumes (2014 and 2020) have become obligatory reading for all those who work in this area; and Branco Milanovic and others. Between them they have transformed research on inequality, offering new measures, techniques, data, analysis and policy options. As a result of their work, there is widespread acknowledgment in political circles of the need to deal with unacceptable levels of inequality, although resistance is ferocious and progress is slow.

The articles in this issue show that research published in the ILR has accompanied and contributed to this process. In the present selection, economic and sociological analyses dominate, but other perspectives on inequality can also be found in the ILR. Deakin, Malmberg and Sarkar (2014) showed how labour laws in general, and laws relating to working time and employee representation in particular, correlate with a higher share of labour in national income, and they also cited earlier work that shows how collective bargaining reduces wage dispersion. There is also a long history of interest in legal and other instruments to counter discrimination, one of the fundamental forces underlying inequality. This has been reflected in a number of ILR articles, especially on gender equality (which is addressed in a separate ILR Centenary Issue), but also with respect to indigenous peoples and other social groups subject to unequal treatment. Tomei's ILR article of 2003 summarized the implications, for inequality, of discrimination in employment and occupation, drawing on a Global Report under the ILO's 1998 Declaration on Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work (ILO 2003). Social security, too, is an important component of action against both poverty and inequality. More generally, a concern with inequality is an essential part of a rights-based approach to work and society that has been a constant in the ILO's work and has repeatedly found its way on to the pages of the ILR.

The distinctive contribution of the ILO to action against poverty and inequality may ultimately come from a better integration of actions in these different fields, given that they can reinforce each other. There is clearly now an opportunity for the ILR to take advantage of its position as a key source of independent thinking within the ILO to explore these issues further and to strengthen the intellectual and empirical foundations of research and action in this domain.

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