

MONITORING PHILIPPINE POVERTY BY OPERATIONAL SOCIAL INDICATORS*

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1. Brief History of Poverty Monitoring

Although national surveys of family income and expenditures were done by official statistical agencies in the Philippines at least as early as 1957, for a long time their main use was for determining consumer basket weights to be used in monthly consumer price indexing. It was not until the mid-1970s that academic researchers began to construct poverty lines, and then apply them to the distributions of income or expenditures from the existing surveys in order to estimate, unofficially, the incidence of poverty (Abrera, 1976). However, although any researcher's poverty threshold could be revised monthly, in line with the consumer price index, the implied poverty incidence could not be reestimated until the next income and expenditures survey, after another five years or so.

Although Ferdinand Marcos claimed his declaration of martial law in September 1972 was a necessary response to "the rebellion of the poor," his administration never adopted an official poverty line, or any other way of quantifying the poverty problem. The typical 'New Society' development plan merely stated that it would benefit the poorest 30 percent, and avoided making targets about poverty reduction (Mangahas, 1979, 1982, 1985), despite the ready availability of various poverty definitions from academic research.

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In 1974-75, a comprehensive research project on social indicators, at the Development Academy of the Philippines (DAP), reviewed the capacity of existing statistical indicators to measure national well-being, and laid out proposals for filling in the most important gaps, including the quantification of poverty (Mangahas, 1977). The project, after doing a pilot provincial survey, concluded that a general survey of household heads and individuals, using subjective or opinion-poll type questions and thus relying on the people's perspective, would be a highly practical means of generating many useful social indicators, among them indicators of poverty and the poverty line.¹ Over 1981-83, the DAP proceeded to execute several such surveys, first at the metropolitan level and then at the national level, in a so-called Social Weather Stations project. However, as it began to probe into socially sensitive concerns, the DAP eventually ran into restrictions on its academic freedom (Mangahas, 1994).

In 1985, the private, non-stock, survey research institute Social Weather Stations (SWS) was established to continue pursuing the social indicators mission, stated as: to generate data, first, to stimulate the eye, next to influence the heart, and, finally, to guide the mind. This is in line with the modern switch of the global social indicators movement from the *technocratic* model — which aims for data to promote technical solutions for social problems — to the *enlightenment* model (Land, 1996). The latter model seeks to place quality-of-life issues on the political agenda by supplying data for public debate through the mass media.² Thus SWS — believing that private institutions should play a role in the generation, for public

¹ They are similar to the many subjective-yet-practical indicators in current use, such as the 'gainers/losers' and 'optimists/pessimists' indicators of Eurobarometer and of the US Conference Board's consumer confidence index.

² According to Vogel (1997, p. 104), this is "the original purpose of social indicators: to send signals to government, business, other organizations, and the general public."

use, of poverty incidence rates and other indicators of the 'social weather' which are meaningful, understandable, credible, frequent, and sustainable — is operationalizing social indicators in the Philippines (Mangahas, 1991).

The first time for an official poverty line to be set was in 1986, under the Aquino government; the line was applied to the latest available family income and expenditures survey (FIES), that of 1985, in order to obtain an official poverty incidence rate for the first time. Thereafter, the FIES's being triennial, official poverty figures were issued, after at least a one year lag, for the survey years 1988, 1991, 1994, and 1997.³ In 1998, a new official survey was launched, named the Annual Poverty Indicators Survey (APIS), in a bid⁴ to fill in the data gaps in non-FIES years; strangely, however, as of June 1999 the data processing of APIS has not reached the point of obtaining the official poverty incidence rate for 1998.

2. The Self-Rating Approach

All poverty measurement approaches incorporate some norms or values. On the one hand, the orthodox predetermined, seemingly objective, poverty-line approach makes use of some top-down or official values. On the other hand, the candidly subjective, or self-rated, approach makes use of bottom-up, or community, or citizens' values. Linked to the notion of subjective poverty lines is that of consensual poverty (Gordon and Spicker, 1999).

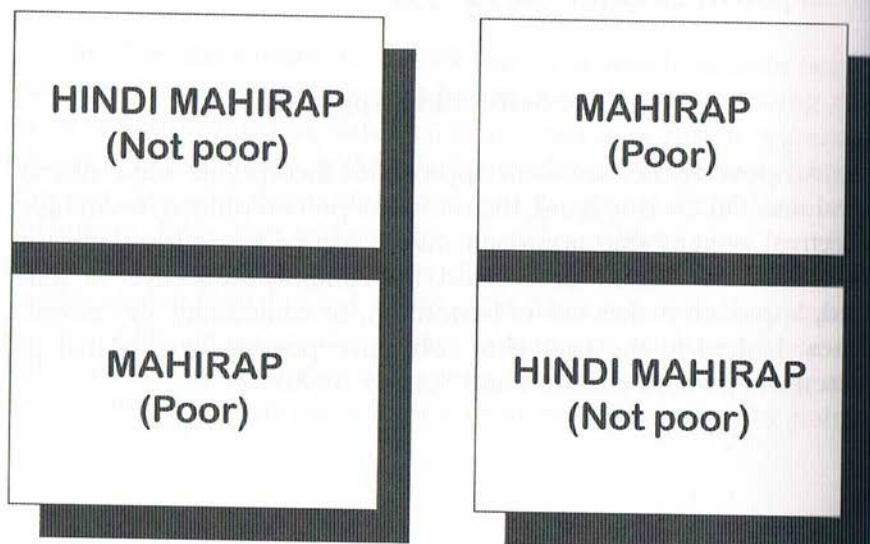
³ The real level of the original 1986 official poverty line was not maintained throughout, however, but was revised downward for reference year 1991.

⁴ Optimistic, because funding for continuing this province-specific and hence highly expensive survey on an annual basis for very long does not seem to be assured. It seems that there will be, at least, a 1999 APIS.

Self-rated poverty. In the SWS approach (Mangahas, 1995), not only does the poverty self-rating not depend on any predetermined poverty line,⁵ but it is done prior to, and even without need for, the self-rating of the poverty line. In virtually every SWS survey, the household head is asked to point to where the household fares in a showcard (Figure 1; half of the sample uses the left card, and the other half uses the right card) featuring only the word POOR, the negative (not the opposite) term NOT POOR, and a line in-between. The word consistently used for POOR, *mahirap*, expresses the least degree of hardship among various Tagalog terms for poverty.

**Figure 1 - Showcards for the Question Item
on Self-Rated Poverty**

Question: "Saan po ninyo ilalagay ang inyong pamilya sa kard na ito?"
(Where would you place your family in this card?)



⁵ This makes it akin to the Eurobarometer approach, in 1976 and 1983, which used the survey question: "Taking everything into account, at about what level is your family situated as far as standard of living is concerned? You may answer by giving a figure between 1 and 7 — number 1 means a poor family and number 7 a rich family." Riffault (1991) interpreted the sum of answers for points 1 and 2 as self-rated poverty.

Self-rated food-poverty. At times, the SWS surveys have asked where the household fares ACCORDING TO ITS FOOD, using the same showcard. The strong relationship of *self-rated poverty to self-rated food-poverty* is illustrated in Figure 2.

Figure 2 - Self-Rated Poverty in Terms of Food by Overall Self-Rated Poverty

Philippines, December 1999

	OVERALL SELF-RATED POVERTY		
	Not Poor (12%)	On the Line (29%)	Poor (59%)
Self-Rated Poverty in Terms of Food			
Not Poor (18%)	75%	7%	6%
On the Line (32%)	13	88	18
Poor (50%)	<u>12</u>	<u>5</u>	<u>76</u>
	100%	100%	100%

Overall Self-Rated Poverty:

*Saan po ninyo ilalagay ang inyong pamilya sa kard na ito?
(Where would you place your family in this card?)*

Self-Rated Poverty in Terms of Food:

*Tungkol po naman sa pagkain ng pamilya ninyo, saan po ninyo ilalagay ang inyong pamilya sa kard na ito?
(Based on the type of food eaten by your family, where would you place your family on this card?)*

Languages	Poor	Not Poor
Tagalog	Mahirap	Hindi Mahirap
Cebuano	Pobre	Dili Pobre
Bicolano	Pobre	Bacong Pobre
Ilocano	Napanglaw	Saan nga Napanglaw
Ilonggo	Imol	Indi Imol
Pangasinense	Mairap	Aliwan Mairap
Waray	Pobre	Diri Pobre
Maguindanon	Miskinan	Dikena Miskinan

Chronic and seasonal poverty. The ordinary poverty self-rating refers to the moment when the respondent is answering the survey question. The aspect of *chronic poverty* can be brought out by asking the self-rated poor for how many of the last five years they felt this way. The aspect of *seasonal poverty* can be brought out by asking the self-rated poor for how many of the past 12 months they felt this way. In April 1997, the last time this was surveyed by SWS, four out of five poor Philippine households were found to be chronically poor, as well as non-seasonally poor (Figure 3).

Figure 3 - Chronic and Seasonal Poverty

Philippines, April 1997

(Base: Those who consider themselves as poor)

	BALANCE				
	RP	NCR	Luzon	Visayas	Mindanao
Chronic Poverty					
5 of the last 5 years	80%	69%	71%	84%	93%
3-4 of the last 5 years	11	12	16	10	4
1-2 of the last 5 years	8	19	13	5	2
Seasonal Poverty					
10-12 of the					
last 12 months	83%	79%	81%	81%	90%
7-9 of the last 12 months	11	9	13	13	6
4-6 of the last 12 months	4	7	4	4	3
1-3 of the last 12 months	2	4	2	0	1

Self-rated poverty thresholds. The SWS surveys regularly ask those who rate themselves as POOR this follow-up question: "How much would your family need for home expenses each month in order not to feel poor anymore?" Those who rate themselves as NOT POOR or as ON THE LINE are asked the slightly revised question: "How much would a family, of the same size as yours,

which felt it was poor, need for home expenses each month in order not to feel poor anymore?" The SWS survey questions for both self-rated poverty and the self-rated poverty line deliberately focus only on the literal word POOR, rather than get involved with phrases such as 'to get along' or 'to make ends meet.'⁶ In the SWS surveys which obtain food-poverty self-ratings, the corresponding follow-up food-threshold question refers to expenses needed 'in order not to be poor in terms of food.'

3. The Supply of Philippine Poverty Data

SWS has tracked the incidence of Philippine poverty, using the self-rated approach, twice a year during 1986-90, and quarterly from 1991 to the present, producing a very lengthy national time-series of 47 data points from mid-1983 to the fourth quarter of 1999 (Figure 4). On the other hand, using the orthodox comparison of income or expenditures to a poverty line, the government has tracked poverty for only five points within the same period, using the FIES. The Social Weather Surveys and the government's FIES/APIS '98 are the only national statistical surveys regularly done in the Philippines for the purpose of monitoring poverty (Reyes, 1999).

⁶ The SWS poverty line questions may be compared to Garner, et al.'s (1996) list of items used in previous subjective poverty line research: the *Minimum Income Question* ("Living where you do now and meeting the expenses you consider necessary, what would be the smallest income (before any deductions) you and your family would need to make ends meet?"), the *Minimum Spend Question* ("In your opinion, how much would you have to spend each month to provide the basic necessities for your family?"), the *Income Evaluation Question* ("Which after-tax monthly income would you, in your circumstances, consider to be very bad? bad? insufficient? good? very good?"), and the *Delighted/Terrible Question* ("Which of the following categories best describes how you feel about your family income (or your own income if you are not living with relatives)? Do you feel delighted, pleased, mostly satisfied, mixed, mostly dissatisfied, unhappy, or terrible?").

Figure 4 - Self-Rated Poverty and Hunger
Philippines, 1983-1999

		SRP	Official Poverty	Hunger
MARCOS				
Apr	83	55%		
Jul	85	74		
	1985		44%	
AQUINO				
May	86	66		
Oct	86	67		
Mar	87	43		
Oct	87	51		
Sep	88	66		
	1988		40	
Feb	89	63		
Sep	89	60		
Apr	90	66		
Nov	90	70		
Jul	91	71		
Nov	91	62		
	1991		40	
Feb	92	72		
Apr	92	68		
RAMOS				
Sep	92	65		
Dec	92	58		
Apr	93	65		
Jul	93	59		
Sep	93	68		
Dec	93	68		
Apr	94	70		
Aug	94	67		

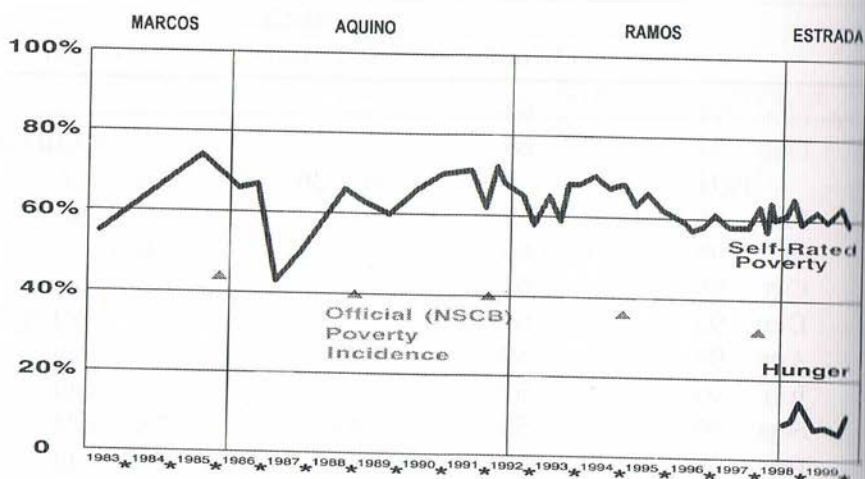
Figure 4 (continued)

	SRP	Official Poverty	Hunger
Nov 94	68		
Dec 94	68		
1994		36	
Mar 95	63		
Jun 95	66		
Oct 95	62		
Dec 95	61		
Apr 96	59		
Jun 96	57		
Sep 96	58		
Dec 96	61		
Apr 97	58		
Jun 97	58		
Sep 97	58		
Dec 97	63		
1997		32	
Feb 98	57		
Mar 98	64		
Apr 98	60		
ESTRADA			
Jul 98	61		8.9%
Sep 98	65		9.7
Nov 98	59		14.5
Mar 99	62		7.7
Jun 99	60		8.0
Oct 99	63		6.5
Dec 99	59		11.0

SRP Question: Where would you place your family in this card? (Not poor, On the line, Poor)

Hunger Question: In the last 3 months, did it happen even once that your family experienced hunger and not have anything to eat? (Yes, No)

**Figure 4 - Self-Rated Poverty and Hunger
Philippines, 1983-1999**



The practical distinction between income-defined poverty and self-rated poverty is not that one is objective and the other subjective, but that income is such a complex construct that surveying it is not, or at least not yet, affordable annually. Yet poverty should be monitored quarterly for it to compete for public attention with the quarterly-estimated Gross National Product. Self-rated poverty is so simple to survey that it can be combined with a great many other topics in the same survey, allowing a cost-sharing which is the key to the financial self-sustainability of the data series (Mangahas and Guerrero, 1998).

4. Features of Philippine Poverty

As Figure 4 shows, self-rated poverty has a far larger magnitude, and far greater volatility, than official⁷ poverty. It

⁷ NSCB stands for National Statistical Coordination Board, which is responsible for constructing the official poverty line.

seems to me that official poverty has a smaller magnitude on account of the unrealistically low official poverty line. Since it is not tracked too often, it has not had much opportunity to manifest volatility.

Relation to hunger. The short trend line labelled Hunger at the bottom of Figure 4 stems from a new SWS survey question which asks household heads if it ever happened, within the past three months, that the household went hungry and did not have anything to eat. A follow-up question asked if the experience of hunger occurred only once, a few times, often, or always. This survey item, prompted by some news reports in early 1998 of cases of hunger caused by the El Niño phenomenon, obtained alarming readings of the national incidence of hunger at 9 percent in July 1998, 10 percent in September 1998, and 15 percent in November 1998, before subsiding somewhat to 8 percent in March 1999 and 6 percent in October 1999, and a surge to 11 percent in December 1999 — illustrating the capacity of the Social Weather Surveys to give rapid feedback to top government officials and other subscribers. The close correlation of hunger to self-rated poverty and to self-rated food poverty is shown in Figures 5 and 6, respectively.

**Figure 5 - Households Who Experienced
Hunger and had Nothing to Eat
in the Past 3 Months by Overall
Self-Rated Poverty [Row Percent]**

Philippines, November 27 - December 15, 1999

	Households who experienced hunger			
	Only once	A few times	Often	Always
Self-rated poverty				
Total Philippines	5.1%	2.5%	2.8%	0.6%
Not poor [12%]	9.0	3.0	--	--
On the line [29%]	14.5	3.2	8.1	3.2
Poor [59%]	25.7	14.5	15.6	3.2

Figure 6 - Households who Experienced Hunger and had Nothing to Eat in the Past 3 Months by Self-Rated Poverty in Terms of Food

Philippines, November 27 - December 15, 1999

[Row Percent]

Self-rated poverty in Terms of Food	Households who experienced hunger			
	Only once	A few times	Often	Always
Total Philippines	5.1%	2.5%	2.8%	0.6%
Not poor [18%]	12.5	--	2.5	--
On the line [34%]	19.7	7.0	8.4	2.8
Poor [48%]	19.9	12.4	12.4	2.4

Relation to self-reported sickness. One of the Social Weather Survey questions for adult respondents asks whether they were sick at any time in the last two weeks. The latest occasion, in September 1997, found 29 percent who said "Yes" in the national sample. Sickness was 32 percent among those from poor households, 28 percent among those from poverty-borderline households, and 19 percent among those from non-poor households (Figure 7).

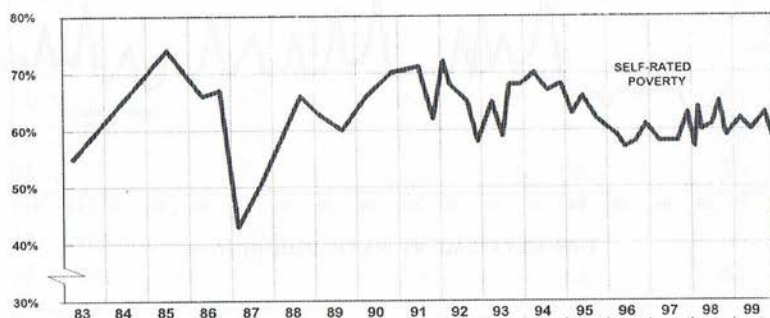
Figure 7 - Experience of Getting Sick in the Past 2 Weeks by Overall Self-Rated Poverty [Row Percent]

Philippines, September 1997

Self-Rated Poverty	In these past two weeks, did you get sick or not?	
	YES	NO
Total Philippines	29%	71%
Not poor [14%]	19	81
On the line [27%]	28	72
Poor [58%]	32	68

Short term trends. In general, the significant⁸ short-term ups and downs of Philippine poverty from the mid-1980s through the 1990s appear to be related, most of all, to the rate of inflation, which has been highly volatile. The rate of unemployment appears to be a secondary factor, while the level of real per capita GNP is relatively unimportant (charted in Figure 8; for a 1983-92 regression analysis, see Mangahas, 1995). In particular, the very significant easing of poverty in early 1987 occurred after inflation had already been zero for several months; the later retrogression occurred together with a rapid rise in inflation back to double-digit by 1988. Another high peak of poverty occurred in 1991, when inflation rose to about 20 percent per annum. The steady decline in poverty over 1994-97 was followed by a setback in 1998-99, obviously due to the onset of the Asian financial crisis.

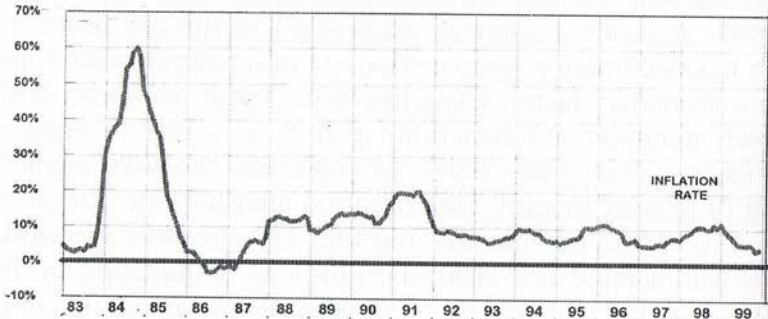
Figure 8



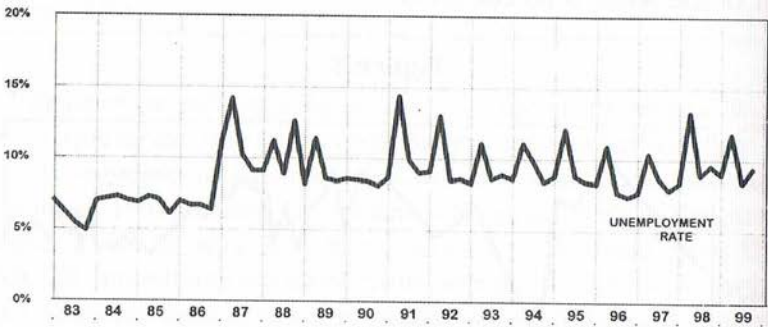
SWS SELF-RATED POVERTY, Philippines

⁸ Larger than the error margin of 3 percent for a proportion coming from a sample of 1,200 households.

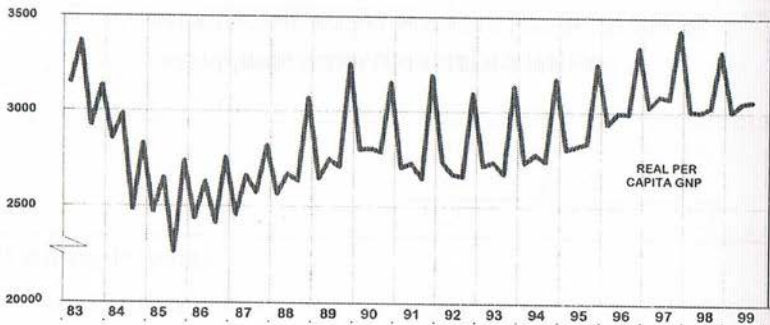
Figure 8 (continued)



YEAR-ON-YEAR INFLATION RATE, Philippines
(CPI, All Items, 1994=100)



UNEMPLOYMENT RATE, Philippines



REAL PER CAPITA GNP, Philippines
(1985 prices)

Regional trends. The trend of poverty according to the broad regional blocks of Metro Manila, Luzon outside Manila, Visayas, and Mindanao is shown in Figure 9. As expected from other evidence, poverty magnitudes are highest in Visayas and Mindanao, and lowest in the National Capital Region. The short-term fluctuations tend to be correlated across regional blocks.

Figure 9 - Self-Rated Poverty and Hunger, by Location, 1985-1999

	Balance			
	NCR	Luzon	Visayas	Mindanao
Self-Rated Poverty:				
MARCOS				
JUL 85	50%	73%	84%	78%
AQUINO				
MAY 86	47	64	76	71
OCT 86	39	70	77	70
MAR 87	30	22	63	70
OCT 87	32	43	69	55
MAR 88	40			
SEP 88	37	58	82	81
FEB 89	38	57	78	76
JUL 89	36			
SEP 89	33	52	79	70
APR 90	39	59	84	79
AUG 90	36			
NOV 90	42	69	80	78
MAR 91	39			
JUL 91	50	71	77	79
SEP 91	31			
NOV 91	33	54	79	79
FEB 92	42	70	82	82
APR 92	50	66	69	81

Figure 9 (continued)

	Balance			
	NCR	Luzon	Visayas	Mindanao
RAMOS				
SEP 92	37	62	78	80
DEC 92	35	47	80	73
APR 93	46	57	78	82
JUL 93	45	58	72	58
SEP 93	41	67	80	75
DEC 93	47	66	77	74
APR 94	49	66	79	78
AUG 94	50	64	78	74
NOV 94	48	63	84	76
DEC 94	47	64	79	76
MAR 95	41	59	76	72
JUN 95	39	67	72	72
OCT 95	45	56	78	67
DEC 95	39	61	72	65
APR 96	42	60	67	61
JUN 96	44	54	69	61
SEP 96	42	50	71	69
DEC 96	32	53	83	73
APR 97	33	52	74	68
JUN 97	35	53	73	67
SEP 97	35	54	69	69
DEC 97	40	56	74	76
FEB 98	39	60	69	52
MAR 98	45	59	74	75
APR 98	42	58	58	77
ESTRADA				
JUL 98	41	65	65	65
SEP 98	42	64	72	77
NOV 98	39	57	66	68
MAR 99	44	58	74	72

Figure 9 (continued)

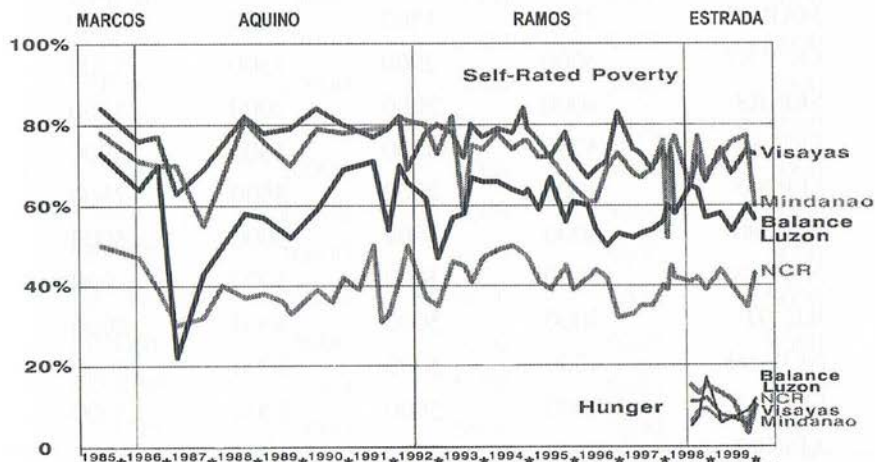
	Balance			
	NCR	Luzon	Visayas	Mindanao
JUN 99	40	54	68	76
OCT 99	35	60	74	77
DEC 99	43	57	73	60

Households who experienced hunger & had nothing to eat:

ESTRADA

JUL 98	6.1	5.1	11.0	15.0
SEP 98	9.0	7.3	11.0	13.0
NOV 98	9.3	17.0	12.0	15.0
MAR 99	6.0	5.7	7.7	13.0
JUN 99	7.3	7.0	7.0	11.3
OCT 99	6.7	8.7	5.3	3.3
DEC 99	11.7	11.7	10.3	10.0

Figure 9 - Self-Rated Poverty and Hunger, by Location, 1985-1999



Poverty threshold trends. The self-rated poverty thresholds would be expected to vary according to the cost of living in the location and according to the household's need. Figure 10, with the trend over time in the medians of the thresholds across the four regional blocks, indicates a much higher cost of living in Metro Manila compared to the other areas, which are much closer together. (Urban portions, when segregated, of the non-Manila regions also have slightly higher poverty thresholds compared to the corresponding rural portions.)

**Figure 10 - Median Self-Rated
Poverty Threshold, by Location,
1985-1999**

	Balance			
	NCR	Luzon	Visayas	Mindanao
MARCOS				
JUL 85	P3000	P1200	P1500	P1500
AQUINO				
MAY 86	3000	1500	1500	1500
OCT 86	3000	1500	1000	1000
MAR 87	2500	1500	1200	1000
OCT 87	3000	2000	1300	1700
SEP 88	4000	2000	2000	1750
FEB 89	3750	2000	3000	3000
SEP 89	4000	2000	3500	2500
APR 90	5000	3000	3000	3000
NOV 90	5000	3000	3000	2000
JUL 91	5000	3000	3000	3000
NOV 91	4000	3000	3000	3000
FEB 92	5000	3000	3000	3000
APR 92	5000	3000	4000	3000

Figure 10 (continued)

	Balance			
	NCR	Luzon	Visayas	Mindanao
RAMOS				
SEP 92	5000	3000	4000	4500
DEC 92	6000	4000	3000	3000
APR 93	5000	3000	3000	3000
JUL 93	6000	3200	4500	4000
SEP 93	6000	4000	4000	5000
DEC 93	6000	4000	5000	4500
APR 94	7500	5000	5000	5000
AUG 94	7000	5000	5000	4500
NOV 94	6000	4500	5000	5000
DEC 94	6000	4000	4000	3600
MAR 95	7000	3500	4000	4000
JUN 95	9000	5000	4000	4000
OCT 95	7000	4000	5000	5000
DEC 95	9500	4000	5000	5000
APR 96	9000	5000	4500	5000
JUN 96	9000	5000	5000	5000
SEP 96	10000	5000	5000	5000
DEC 96	8000	5000	5000	5000
APR 97	10000	6000	5000	5000
JUN 97	10000	5000	5000	6000
SEP 97	10000	5000	5000	5000
DEC 97	8000	5000	5000	5000
FEB 98	8000	5000	5000	3500
MAR 98	10000	5000	6000	5000
APR 98	10000	5000	7000	5000

Figure 10 (continued)

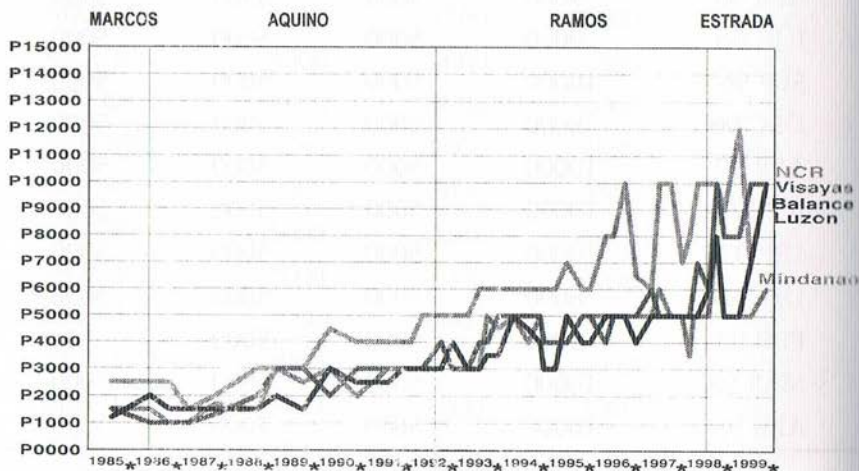
	Balance			
	NCR	Luzon	Visayas	Mindanao
ESTRADA				
JUL 98	10000	6000	6000	7000
SEP 98	14000	7500	10000	8000
NOV 98	10000	6000	9000	5000
MAR 99	12000	5000	8000	5000
JUN 99	7000	7000	10000	5000
OCT 99	10000	10000	10000	6000
DEC 99	10000	6000	7000	10000

Question:

IF POOR: In your opinion, how much money would your family need for home expenses each month in order not to be called poor anymore?

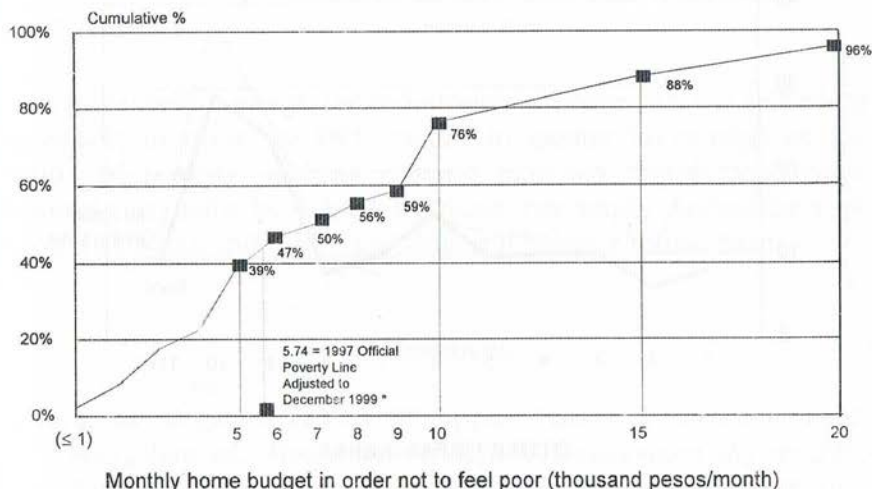
IF NOT POOR/ON THE LINE: For a family as large as yours but poor, how much money do you think would it need to spend each month for home expenses in order not to be considered poor anymore?

Figure 10 - Median Self-Rated Poverty Threshold, by Location, 1985-1999



Poverty threshold variation. Is the reason why there are so many self-rated poor because they have unreasonably high demands in the way of a home budget? Figure 11, with the cumulative distribution of the thresholds of the self-rated poor in the December 1999 survey, shows that less than half of the poor would be satisfied with an adjusted official poverty line of some P5,745 per month, for a family of five. To satisfy about three-fourths of the poor would require a home budget of P10,000, equivalent to \$263 per month at the current 38:1 exchange rate.

Figure 11 - Poverty Threshold of the Self-Rated Poor
Philippines, December 1999



- * Computed as : $\text{P}11,388/12 \times 5.1 \times .1867 = \text{P} 5.74$
 Where : $\text{P}11,388$ is the annual per capita threshold, RP (source: NSCB)
 5.1 is the average household size (source: NSO - 1995 Census of Population)
 18.67% is the increase in CPI from July 1997 to December 1999

Family size. The cumulative distribution of poverty thresholds in Figure 11 made no allowances for cost of living or for family size. Figure 12 shows the relation of poverty threshold to family size, for separate locations of Metro Manila, other urban areas, and rural areas, in each case distinguishing between the thresholds of the poor and those of the non-poor/borderline, which are somewhat higher, as would be expected.

Figure 12 - Poverty Threshold of Family Size
Philippines, December 1999

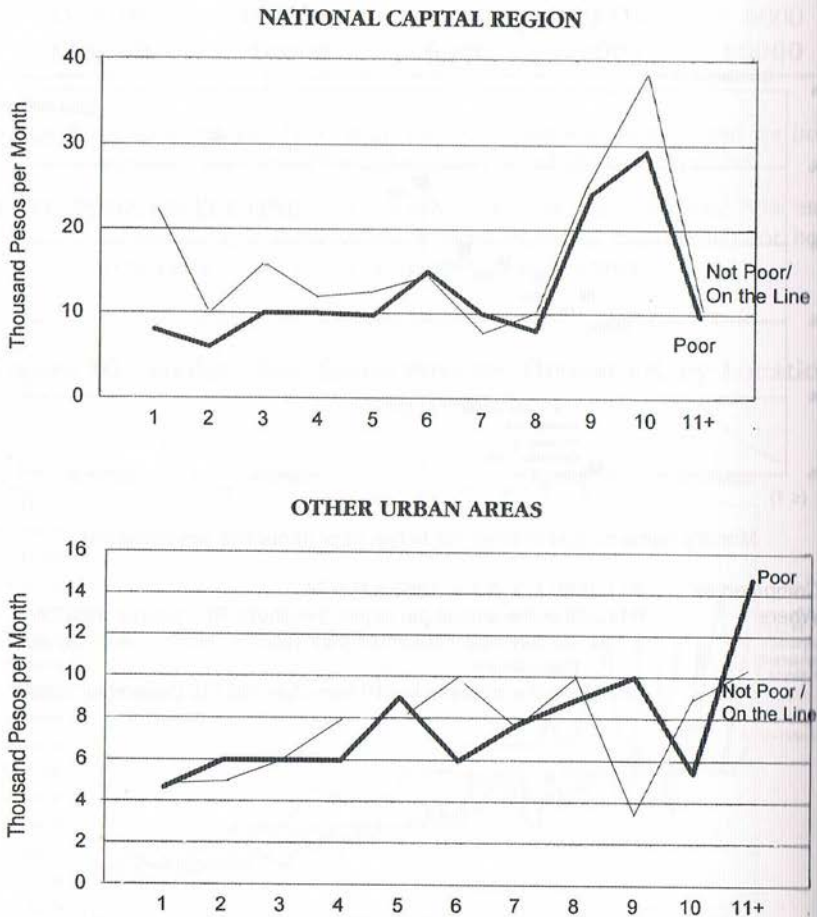
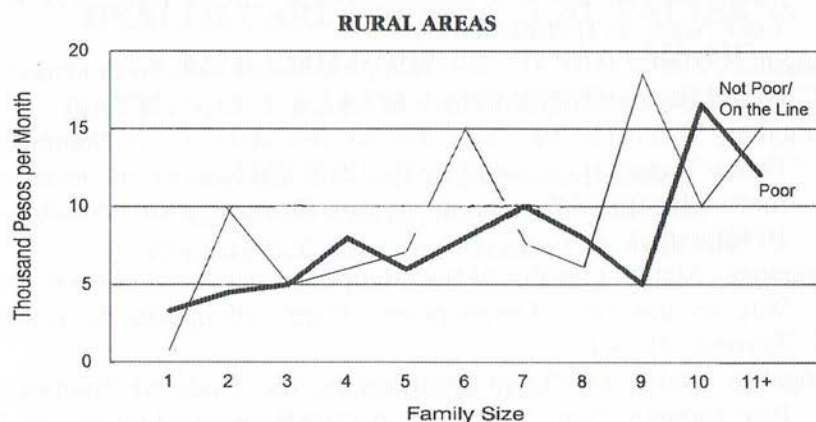


Figure 8 (continued)



In general, it seems, the monitoring of poverty by the self-rating approach, as done by SWS, results in greater knowledge of the nature of poverty, without running into any highly implausible features, as might be feared by those previously unfamiliar with subjective social indicators and thus still hesitant to use them.

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