Subjective measures in humanitarian analysis

Description

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A note for ACAPS, by Aldo Benini, A. (2018). PDF available at
https://www.acaps.org/sites/acaps/files/resources/files/20180115_acaps_technical_note_subjective_meas

Purpose and motivation

This note seeks to sensitize analysts to the growing momentum of subjective methods and measures around, and eventually inside, the humanitarian field. It clarifies the nature of subjective measures and their place in humanitarian needs assessments. It weighs their strengths and challenges. It discusses, in considerable depth, a small number of instruments and methods that are ready, or have good potential, for humanitarian analysis.

Post World War II culture and society have seen an acceleration of subjectivity in all institutional realms, although at variable paces. The sciences responded with considerable lag. They have created new methodologies â?? â??mixed methodsâ?• (quantitative and qualitative), â??subjective measuresâ?•, self-assessments of all kinds â?? that claim an equal playing field with distant, mechanical objectivity. For the period 2000-2012, using the search term â??subjective measureâ?•, Google Scholar returns around 600 references per year; for the period 2013 â?? fall 2017, the figure quintuples to 3,000. Since 2012, the United Nations has been publishing the annual World Happiness Report; its first edition discusses validity and reliability of subjective measures at length.

Closer to the humanitarian domain, poverty measurement has increasingly appreciated subjective data. Humanitarian analysis is at the initial stages of feeling the change. Adding â??AND humanitarianâ?• to the above search term produces 8 references per year for the first period, and 40 for the second â?? a trickle, but undeniably an increase. Other searches confirm the intuition that something is happening below the surface; for instance, â??mixed method AND humanitarianâ?• returns 110 per year in the first, and 640 in the second period â?? a growth similar to that of â??subjective measuresâ?•.

Still in some quarters subjectivity remains suspect. Language matters. Some collaborations on subjective measures have preferred billing them as â??experience-based measuresâ?•. Who doubts experience? It is good salesmanship, but we stay with â??subjectiveâ?• unless the official name of the measure contains â??experienceâ?•.

What follows

We proceed as follows: In the foundational part, we discuss the nature of, motivation for, and reservations against, subjective measures. We provide illustrations from poverty measurement and from food insecurity studies. In the second part, we present three tools â?? scales, vignettes and hypothetical questions â?? with generic pointers as well as with specific case studies. We conclude with recommendations and by noting instruments that we have not covered, but which are likely to grow more important in years to come

Rick Davies comment: High recommended!

Category

1. Uncategorized

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