

To: The Wall Street Journal  
14 February 2018

Letter for publication

Regarding The Enlightenment Is Working, 9 February:

Steven Pinker writes, "In 1988...37% [of humans] lived in extreme poverty, barely able to feed themselves, compared with 9.6% today".

Perhaps he could explain his reasoning.

The UN has estimated around:

- 23% of young children were stunted in 2016 (1);
- 20% of adults were "moderately or severely food insecure" in 2015 with no estimates for previous decades (2);
- 11% of people chronically lacked calories in 2014-6 compared with - not around 35% - in 1990-2 but under 19% (3).

It is not obvious how we could know, even if FAO statistics were reliable and it were clear what we meant, how many are "able to feed themselves" (or for how long) compared to previous decades.

On "extreme poverty", the World Bank methodology paper in fact says "countries...frequently change the questionnaires over time" (4).

If someone claims they have reliable inflation rates for the poor, perhaps they could publish them.

More fundamentally, could the professor explain how a fixed amount of money could measure poverty? Absolute poverty is supposed to be where your needs are greater than your resources.

Would he say he is better off if he is forced to spend more?

Does he have information on whether poor people's needs to spend on rent, transport, public services or other things went up or down?

There seems a widespread confusion between

- a) consumption poverty (how adequate);
- b) consumption amount (how much);
- c) consumption expenditure - which is what most of the household surveys ask about.

Professor Pinker writes "it's good to be accurate" and emphasises "reason".

It is not clear why official claims on progress should ever be reproduced without analysis.

Matt Berkley  
globalfactcheck.org

(1) <https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/files/report/2017/secretary-general-sdg-report-2017--Statistical-Annex.pdf>, page 11.

(2) <http://unstats.un.org/sdgs/files/report/2016/secretary-general-sdg-report-2016--Statistical-Annex.pdf>, page 7.

(3) <http://www.fao.org/3/a-i4646e.pdf>, page 8 of the printed document.

(4) The UN information on the global "extreme poverty" target <https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/files/metadata-compilation/Metadata-Goal-1.pdf> links, on page 4, to the methodology paper: <http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/360021468187787070/pdf/WPS7432.pdf>