Rural poverty in Mexico: prevalence and challenges

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Today, around eighty percent of the population of Mexico (120 million) lives in urban areas. Although urbanization processes have helped to significantly improve the living conditions providing more access to services and infrastructure, the concentration of opportunities in the cities, often accompanied by complex spatial segregation processes, has propitiated the polarization of development and the backwardness of the population living in rural settings.

In Mexico there are 74 metropolitan areas that concentrate just over sixty percent of the national population. These areas are equipped with services, infrastructure and opportunities for development and social mobility which, however, are unequally distributed between development poles of greater or lesser inclusion, due to the spatial segregation that has caused the disordered growth of cities.

On the other hand, slightly more than 97 per cent of the 192,000 localities in the country[2] are inhabited by fewer than 2,500 people (official demographic criterion for the definition of rurality), and more than nine out of ten among them are inhabited with a population of fewer than 500 people. These territories have lost relative weight regarding the volumen of the population, due to the urbanization procesess, but they have continued to grow in absolute terms.

Thus, Mexico is a country with a demographic and territorial dynamic that tends, on the one hand, to the urban concentration and, on the other, to the rural dispersion. This feature produces differentiated scenarios of poverty that need to be recognized and attended simultaneously by social policy.

The National Council for the Evaluation of Social Development Policy (CONEVAL, Consejo Nacional de Evaluación de la Política de Desarrollo Social) produces information that allows

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[2] According to the National Population Council, CONAPO.

to distinguish scenarios of precariousness and vulnerability in both rural and urban environments, in order to contribute to improving the performance and accountability of social development policy, in particular, through the measurement of poverty and social development at the national and the state level.

A measurement based on social rights and income

According to Goal 1 of the Sustainable Development Goals: "End of poverty in all its forms everywhere", the proportion of the rural Mexican population living below the international poverty line (1.90 per day) was 14.6% in 2014, which is almost half of the observed percentage two decades before (27.5%). However, the level of development and income of the country deserves to establish more demanding thresholds. Therefore, since the General Law of Social Development was inacted in 2004, Mexico assumed the task of constructing a multidimensional poverty measurement methodology with the aim to reflect the need to recognize poverty as a multidimensional phenomenon which comprises aspects related to living conditions that threaten the dignity of people, limit their rights and freedoms, prevent the fulfillment of their basic needs and hamper their full social integration.

Mexico was the first country to introduce an oficial multidimensional poverty measure; an index which, in addition to considering the lack of economic resources, includes other dimensions that social policy must address.

The methodology implemented by CONEVAL links two distinct perspectives in a single coherent conceptual framework: economic well-being and social rights. This identifies the poor population lacking both, sufficient economic resources and basic access to social rights (such as access to food, health, education, social security or dignified housing). On the basis of this methodology it is possible to adopt a path of comprehensive social development based on a rights approach, and to monitor the different dimensions that impact human development and guide the design of public policies, aiming at comprehensive and universal social inclusion.

Multidimensional poverty measurement

According to the General Law for Social Development, CONEVAL must establish guidelines and criteria to define, identify and measure poverty, taking into account the following indicators:

income, educational lag, access to health services, access to social security, access to food, housing and quality space, access to basic housing services, degree of social cohesion and degree of accessibility to paved roads.[3]

Figure 1.
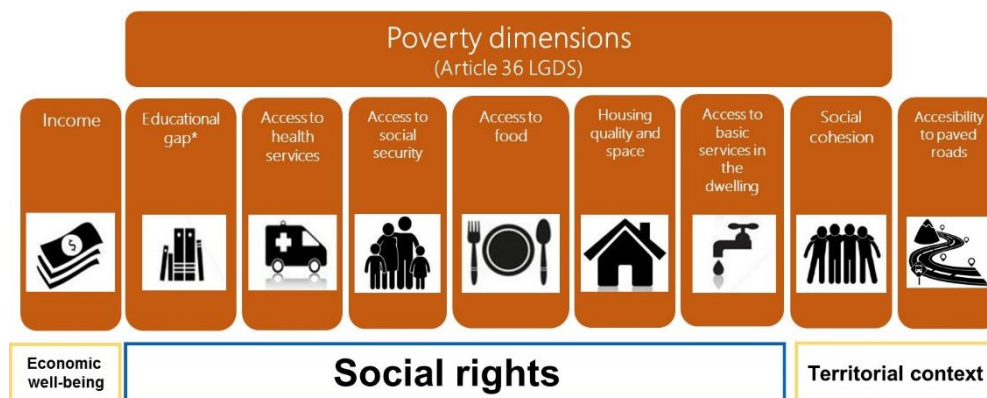
Thus, the measurement considers income and six dimensions within a social rights framework. This is complemented by the inclusion of two aspects associated to relational and territorial factors that must be analyzed in terms of their impact on society, but they can only be measured on a territorial level.

Poverty is measured at national and the state level every two years and every five years at the municipal level. To accomplish this, CONEVAL uses information generated by the National Institute of Statistics and Geography (INEGI, Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Geografía). The source of this information, the frequency of measurement and the level of territorial disaggregation are designed to generate a rigourous diagnosis providing decision-makers with the elements required for the design of public policies to improve the population's quality of life.

Identification of people living in poverty

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[3] CONEVAL. 2018. Methodology for the Multidimensional Measurement of Poverty. Mexico: CONEVAL. Available at: https://www.coneval.org.mx/InformesPublicaciones/InformesPublicaciones/Documents/Metodologia-medicion-multidimensional-3er-edicion.pdf

The identification of the population in poverty is based on an analysis of their economic conditions and social deprivations. The population living in multidimensional poverty are those who are deprived in at least one social dimension and whose income falls below the income poverty line, calculated as the income needed to afford both basic food and non-food baskets of goods and services. The fact that this methodology considers the presence of at least one deprivation as a sign of vulnerability or propension to poverty acknowledges the importance of not letting anyone behind. In 2016, 43.6% of the population (53.4 million) lived in poverty.

Wihtin this group, the identification of the population living in extreme poverty it is of particular relevance. This condition is defined as having simultaneously an income below the cost of the basic food basket (extreme income poverty line) and three or more social deprivations. They represent the poorest of the poor, who must be prioritized by state policies- given their greater needs and precarious conditions. 7.6% of the population (9.4 million) were in this position. Even though the ultimate purpose is to eradicate extreme poverty, this has to be done with a sense of progressivity that prioritizes the extreme expression of precariousness.

Figure 2.

Identification of poverty
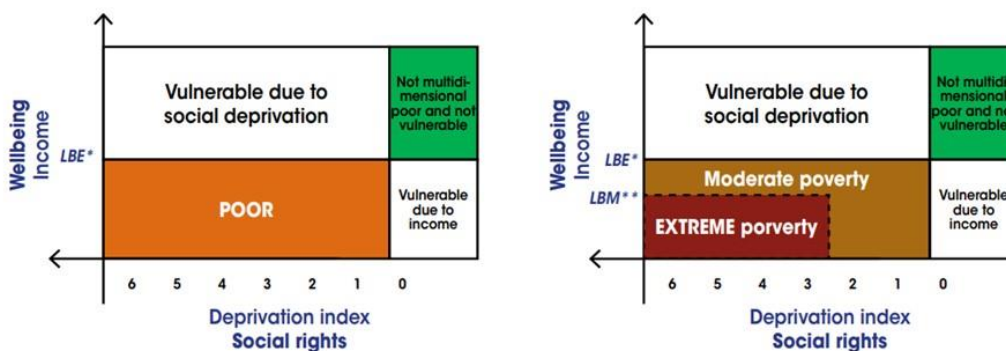
*LBE: Wellbeing Threshold
**LBM: Minumum Wellbeing Threshold

The Mexican multidimensional poverty measure is used as well to identify two more vulnerable groups, due either to social deprivation (despite having enough income to acquire the food and non-food baskets, they suffer from at least one social deprivation) (26.8%, 32.9 million people in 2016), or to insufficient income (without social deprivations but income below the income poverty line) (7.0%, 8.6 million people in 2016).

The non-poor nor vulnerable population is the complement to these three groups: both with sufficient income and with no social deprivations (22.6%, 27.8 million people in 2016). In the social rights approach, this last group represents an important reference point for public policy aimed at eliminating poverty: every person, family, community and region in Mexico should converge steadily toward a minumum floor in both spaces: income and social rights.

For the assessment of rural poverty, the measurement of poverty at the municipal level is of fundamental importance, since it allows to refine the accuracy of the diagnosis of social and economic deprivation in the territories, by creating an information system that includes poverty and social deprivation maps with very specific disaggregation.

In this same line of work, CONEVAL publishes every five years the Social Lag Index (IRS, Índice de Rezago Social), a synthetic measure that provides an overview of social deprivations at the local level. In addition, the Council works on a reasearch agenda that aims to produce estimates of poverty in smaller areas (such as urban or rural districts). All of these inputs are intended to provide information with a very high analytical potential that highlights the importance of the territorial dimension for poverty eradication through public policies and by adressing the diversity of living conditions within the country.

The analysis of this information has allowed CONEVAL to identify two relevant phenomena: on the one hand, the depth of poverty in rural settings and its notable contrasts with the urban space; on the other, what is considered to be the "dual problem" of poverty in Mexico. This problem concerns the presence of a mixed scenario in which there is, on one side, a high proportional representation of poverty in demographically smaller territories, typically rural, while large territorial units concentrate a greater volume of population in this condition, although in relative terms their weight is less.

**The inequality of multidimensional poverty: rural-urban differences**
For many years, the social policy in Mexico, aiming at the eradication of poverty has been focused to the structural and chronic poverty experienced by people living in the countryside. The purpose has been to break the intergenerational transmission of precarity, by

strengthening individual human capital.[4] Some of these interventions have had notable effects on the living conditions in these environments. Between 2010 and 2016, rural poverty decreased by over ten percent, while extreme poverty fell by more than thirty percent. In absolute terms, this implied that slightly more than two million people left this condition.

On the other hand, poverty shows other characteristics in the cities, where social programs began their intervention later. In these settings poverty fell by just three percent in the same period. The most notorious advance occurred among the population in extreme poverty, which also fell by thirty per cent. The difficulty in reducing urban poverty suggests that it has distinctive features which in turn require to implement specific social policies that take into account the complexity of the economic system and the social dynamics of cities.

Graph 1.

Percentage of population by condition of poverty or vulnerability, according to size of locality, 2010-2016
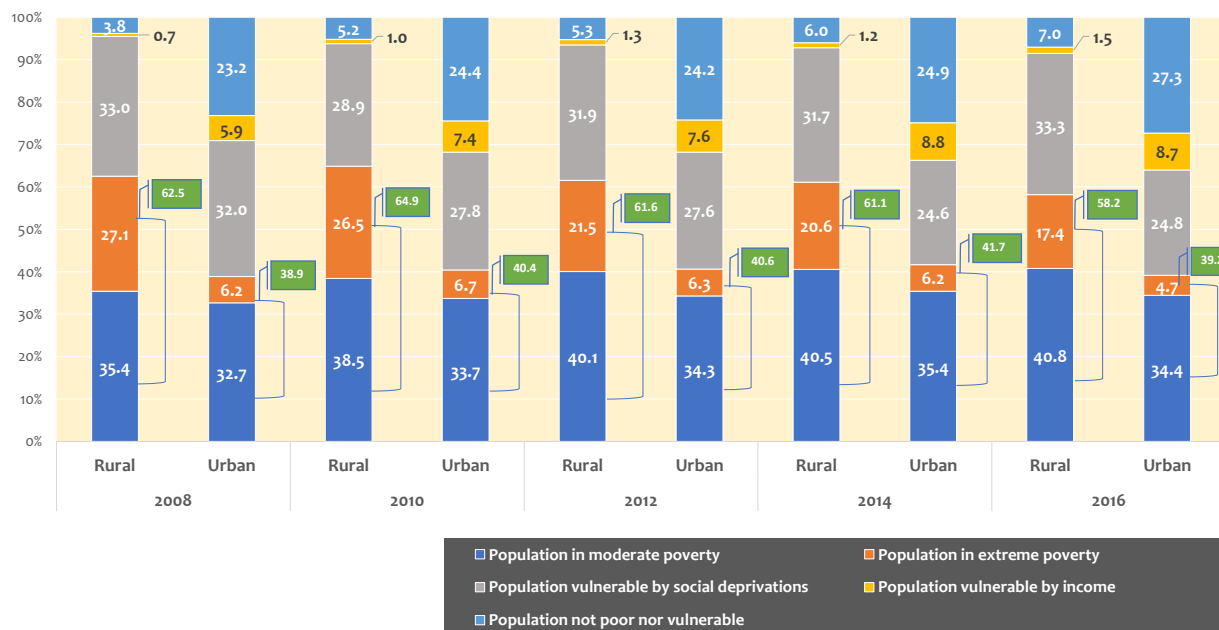
Source: CONEVAL based on MCS-ENIGH 2010-2014 and MEC-MCS-ENIGH, 2016.

With the exception of the lack of access to health services, rural populations have higher percentages of deprivation in access to the rest of the basic aspects that encompass their

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[4] Specially since the creation of the social program PROGRESA-OPORTUNIDADES-PROSPERA, an intervention based mostly on public transfers aimed to guarantee Access to education, food and health.

social rights accomplishment. Although the reduction of its shortcomings has been very noticeable –partly because of the greater margin of incidence-, even in 2016 its levels of deprivation were higher than those presented by the urban population in 2010. The decline in urban poverty and deprivation has been lower and, although they appear to be smaller in relative terms, they account for a larger number of people.

Graph 2.
Population (percentage and millions) with social deprivation and insufficient income, according to size of locality, 2016
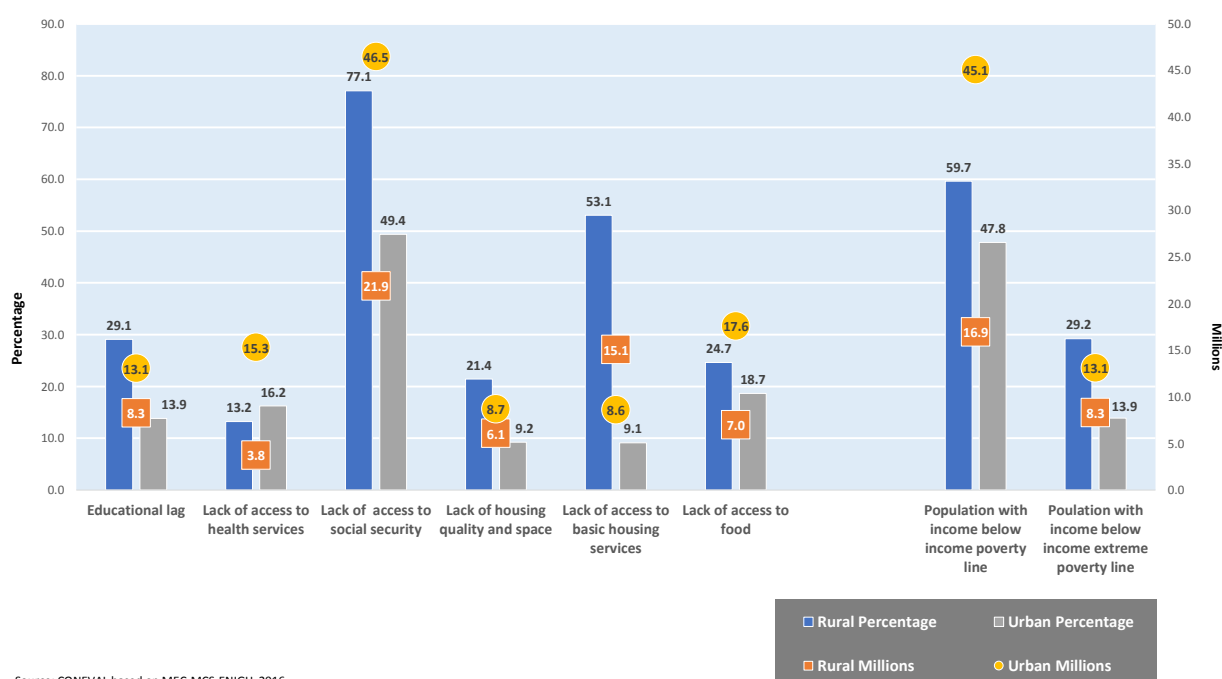
Source: CONEVAL based on MEC-MCS-ENIGH, 2016.

Not only does the magnitude of poverty change between territories, but also its structure. This represents an important challenge for social policy, because it implies knowing the economic and social dynamics of each context and identifying the actions that are relevant in each environment.

Although the deprivation of greater predominance at the national level is access to social security –particularly relevant for the the urban labour market- poverty in the countryside is characterized by a greater presence of very basic or structural deficiencies, related to the precariousness of housing, its materials and services. In contrast, progress in reducing the

lack of access to health services and, in a striking way, the lack of access to food is notable at the countryside (graph 3).

Graph 3.

Percentage distribution of social deprivation amongst population in poverty, according to size of localities, 2016

Source: CONEVAL based on MEC-MCS-ENIGH, 2016.

The dual problem of poverty

The double movement of population concentration and dispersion that characterizes the demographic distribution of the country has strong implications for the planning of the policy of social and economic development. It obliges, on the one hand, to improve the conditions of growth and equality in the most developed territories and, on the other, to generate the necessary conditions for it to detonate where infrastructure and opportunities need to be distributed.

Of the 2.446 municipalities for which it was possible to produce information on poverty in 2015,[5] only five of them concentrate the same amount of population in poverty as 450 smaller municipalities. These municipalities (table 1) are urban units of major size, with greater service

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[5] In total Mexico has 2457 municipalities. The statistical sample of the 2015 Intercensal Survey provided complete information for only 2.446.

infrastructure, but also with major problems of supply and quality in basic services, as well as precarious and poorly paid labor markets.

Table 1.

Five municipalities with greater volume of population in poverty, 2015

No.	State	Municipality	Population 2015	Percentage of poverty 2015	Populaiton in poverty 2015	Percentage contribution to the poverty population of the five municipalities
1	México	Ecatepec de Morelos	1,840,902	42.7	786,843	24.8
2	Puebla	Puebla	1,719,828	40.6	699,016	22.0
3	Distrito Federal	Iztapalapa	1,903,552	35.0	665,408	21.0
4	Guanajuato	León	1,659,125	31.5	522,736	16.5
5	Baja California	Tijuana	1,693,494	29.5	499,136	15.7
	Total		**8,816,901**	**36.0**	**3,173,139**	**100.0**

Source: CONEVAL based on MCS-ENIGH 2010, Populatoing and Housing Census 2010, MEC ENIGH 2015 and Intercensal Survey 2015.

Although the percentages of poverty in each of these municipalities are not the highest in the whole country, the volume of their population places them in the first five national places. This phenomenon of demographic concentration of poverty occurs in parallel with that of its dispersion.

To prove it, it suffices to consider that population in poverty agglutinated in these five municipalities (about 3.2 million people) is the same that inhabits the 450 municipalities with higher percentages of poverty in the country; that is, territorial units with lower demographic density but with much greater depth and intensity of poverty. Among this group of remarkably deprived municipalities, the lowest percentage of poverty is 87.5%.

Rural poverty, specially extreme rural poverty, is related to conditions of geographical isolation, characterized, among others, by the lack of adequate roads connecting localities with centres with economic and social infrastructure. CONEVAL measures the access of the localities to paved roads, which is defined in terms distance, availability of public transportation and the time of transfer to service centers.

The analysis shows that about 12% of the population lives in locations with low or very low accessibility levels; these localities are inhabited by 150 inhabitants on average. These places are concentrated in states with the highest percentages of poverty of the country (Oaxaca, Chiapas and Guerrero, in the south and southeast of the country), in which three out of four people live in localities with problems of geographical isolation.

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An additional aspect of rural poverty in Mexico is its ethnic composition. In Mexico there are about 7 million people who speak an indigenous language (ethnic identification criterion). More than 40% is concentrated in rural areas of the states with higher levels of poverty, which accounts for the close relationship between ethnicity and poverty in the country. In 2016, 77.6% of the indigenous-language-speaking population was in poverty and 34.8% in extreme poverty. Among the population that does not speak indigenous language, the proportions were 41.0 and 5.8, respectively. Although the levels of extreme poverty among the indigenous population are very high, between 2010 and 2016, it was reduced from 44.7% to 34.8%.

Final comments

The definition, identification and measurement of poverty from the multidimensional perspective undertaken by CONEVAL have helped to characterize the population living in poverty, as well as the poorest and vulnerable population groups, and their distribution within the country. The appropriation of a measure of this nature has been possible thanks to the fact that it is a State effort that not only created a legal framework for its creation but also for its use by the instances involved in social development, at every government level.

The double movement of population concentration and dispersion, coupled with the processes of spatial segregation in cities and geographical isolation in the rural environment, contribute to the reproduction of poverty and inequality. The differences are not only presented in terms of the magnitude of rural and urban poverty, but also of the internal composition of each one of them.

These distinctions require simultaneous approaches from a public policy with territorial perspective, that attends both the places where the precariousness reaches to a greater number of people, as where as those where the volume is lower but their proportional representation is bigger. In addition, actions are required to restore people's ability to access basic development elements, irrespective of where they reside.

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