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Conceptualising destitution

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Summary

The concept of “destitution” presents challenges to several preoccupations of contemporary poverty discourse: the definition of poverty (narrowly income-based *versus* broader multi-dimensional approaches); the measurement of poverty (quantitative *versus* participatory methods); and the temporal dimension (chronic *versus* transitory poverty). Recognition of the multi-dimensionality of poverty has rarely been reflected in integrated analytical or policy frameworks. The Millennium Development Goals focus on simple quantitative targets, and fail to differentiate between degrees of poverty. By contrast, this paper argues that destitution is intrinsically a multi-dimensional concept, and it emphasises the severity of poverty – in contrast to “chronic poverty”, which emphasises the duration of poverty. A definition of destitution is proposed with three components: inability to meet subsistence needs, assetlessness, and dependence on transfers. A conceptual framework is developed for analysing destitution that draws on the “sustainable livelihoods” approach.

Contents

	Summary	iii
1	Introduction	1
2	Destitution in the poverty discourse	2
3	Defining destitution	8
4	Local concepts of destitution in Ethiopia	13
5	Analysing destitution	17
6	Conclusion	23
	References	24

Figure

Figure 5.1	A livelihoods approach to conceptualising destitution	20
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Table

Table 4.1	Local terms and phrases for the poorest group in the community	16
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1 Introduction ¹

Unlike “poverty” or “food insecurity”, “destitution” is an undefined term in the development literature. Although the word is often used, with the colloquial meaning of severe poverty and dependence on the goodwill of others, there is no accepted technical definition, nor does a standardised set of tools exist for analysing and quantifying destitution.² Recently, an apparently deepening livelihoods crisis in the historically famine-prone area of Wollo in highland Ethiopia motivated a research project into the extent, causes and characteristics of destitution among this highly vulnerable population. In the absence of a definition, the Destitution Study team developed our own working definition and conceptual framework, drawing on theoretical and empirical literature, as well as local perceptions of poverty and destitution that were articulated by villagers during fieldwork in Wollo. This paper presents the results of that conceptual work.

Broadly, this paper addresses the question: *‘What is destitution?’* Specifically, it considers four conceptual and analytical issues:

- the ***concept of destitution*** in the poverty literature;
- the ***definition of destitution***, both theoretically and in operational terms;
- ***local perceptions of destitution*** in Ethiopia;
- how to ***analyse destitution***: introducing the conceptual framework for the research.

This paper is structured as follows. The next section discusses the meaning of destitution. It first reviews the theoretical and international literature on destitution and its relationship to concepts of poverty. It then develops an operational definition of “destitution” for purposes of the Destitution Study research project; considers how well this definition fits with local people’s understanding and experience of extreme poverty; and lays out the livelihoods-based conceptual framework that informed the methodology design, data collection and data analysis. Although the project was confined to three zones of Amhara Region – South Wollo, North Wollo and Wag Hamra – the intention was to develop an analytical framework and a methodology that are generalisable to the study of destitution elsewhere in Amhara Region, other regions of Ethiopia, and beyond.

¹ An earlier version of this paper was prepared as an output of Phase I of the research project ‘Destitution in Ethiopia’s Northeast Highlands (Amhara Region)’, commissioned by Save the Children (UK) Ethiopia and funded by the Department for International Development (DFID), UK (Devereux 2000). This Working Paper is an elaborated version of Chapter 2 in the final study report (Devereux *et al.* 2003; Sharp *et al.* 2003). I am grateful for the contributions of my colleagues on the research team, Kay Sharp (IDS Sussex) and Dr Yared Amare (Institute of Development Research, University of Addis Ababa), and for feedback from participants at project workshops in Addis Ababa and Bahir Dar, between September 2000 and April 2003.

² A companion Working Paper to this one – ‘Measuring destitution: integrating qualitative and quantitative approaches in the analysis of survey data’, by Kay Sharp, (*IDS Working Paper* 217, December 2003) – addresses the question of how to quantify destitution in any given study area, using a range of survey-based and participatory research methods.

2 Destitution in the poverty discourse

The recent academic literature on poverty has addressed three polarised issues that are relevant to this discussion about how to conceptualise destitution. The first is a definitional concern with narrow (income-based) *versus* broad (non-material) notions of what poverty actually is; the second is a technical concern with the measurement of poverty, specifically, the use of quantitative methods *versus* qualitative methods; and the third is an empirical concern with “chronic poverty” *versus* “transitory poverty”. These ongoing debates concern, respectively, the *definition* of poverty (a conceptual issue), the *analysis* of poverty (a methodological issue), and the *temporal* dimension of poverty (an empirical issue).

Since the late 1970s, economists have paid sporadic but still inadequate attention to the incontestable reality that poverty is multi-dimensional. While per capita GDP remains the single most influential measure of national and global “development”, and the percentage of population living on less than “a dollar a day” the most influential measure of poverty at national and subnational levels, a number of attempts have been made to incorporate non-income determinants and characteristics of poverty. The Physical Quality of Life Index [PQLI] (Morris 1979) and the UNDP’s Human Development Index [HDI] (UNDP 2000; see also Anand and Sen 1997) represent attempts to quantify absolute and relative poverty in terms of outcomes (life expectancy, infant mortality and literacy levels, in the case of the HDI), while the ‘pyramid of poverty concepts’ graphically captures narrow *versus* broad conceptualisations of poverty (Baulch 1996).³ Against this trend, some economists continue to argue that “money-metric” measures of poverty adequately capture or proxy for other dimensions of deprivation (Greeley 1994; Lipton 1997), sometimes supplemented by ‘non-income indicators’ (Ravallion 1996).

There are of course significant overlaps between standard income and non-income poverty measures. One recent study established a correlation coefficient between GDP per capita and the HDI of 0.69 (Kosack 2003: 2). The extent to which these two proxies for poverty are not perfectly correlated is explained by the fact that welfare outcomes are determined by factors other than income, and because a single datum – average national income per capita at a point in time – ignores ‘the distribution of income between individuals, groups and regions within a country, as well as the distribution between these of social provision’ (Belshaw and Livingstone 2002: 11). A number of recent studies have examined the static or dynamic correlation between monetary poverty (income, expenditure or consumption) and non-monetary indicators (education, anthropometry, morbidity, etc.). Sahn and Stifel (2000) find low correlations between these indicators across several country surveys in Africa, which they attribute partly to the fact that monetary measures or proxies reflect poverty at the time of the survey, while education and health status reflect accumulated stocks of well-being. Baulch and Masset (2003) find similarly modest overlaps between monetary and non-monetary poverty indicators from an analysis of panel survey data for Vietnam in the 1990s, which they also explain in terms of “dynamic divergences” between highly variable short-term incomes and less reversible nutrition and education levels.

³ In Baulch’s poverty pyramid, ‘private consumption’ is the narrowest concept of poverty, while the broadest is ‘private consumption + common property resources + state provided commodities + assets + dignity + autonomy’ (Baulch 1996: 2).

Two conceptual culminations of the multi-dimensional view are Sen's capabilities approach (Sen 1985; 1993; see also Nussbaum 2000; Alkire 2002) and his 'development as freedom' argument (Sen 1999), both of which embody Sen's insight that income and wealth have little intrinsic value but should instead be analysed as means to an end. 'The usefulness of wealth lies in the things that it allows us to do – the substantive freedoms it helps us to achieve' (Sen 1999: 14). A third innovative alternative is the "livelihoods approach", which recognises the contributions made by various types of assets or "capitals" in constructing a sustainable livelihood (Scoones 1998; Carney 1998; Ellis 2000). These "capitals" include material assets (financial, physical and natural capital) as well as non-material resources (human capital such as literacy and health, social capital such as claims on the extended family). Some variations add "political capital" and/or "cultural capital" (Bebbington 1999).

In the mid-1990s, "social exclusion" – a concept that emphasises the social deprivation and marginalisation that attaches to poverty in affluent societies – gained currency in poverty discourse, first in the affluent "North" (Putnam *et al.* 1993; Putnam 1995), though it was then applied to poverty in the impoverished "South" (Bhalla and Lapeyre 1997; de Haan and Maxwell 1998; Fine 2001). In France, poverty has always been understood in societal terms: as a tear in the "social fabric". Severe deprivation in Europe or North America is also often associated with an urban "poverty syndrome" that has social dimensions that go well beyond material deprivation, such as vulnerability to crime, the "drugs culture", and domestic violence.⁴ In 1997, the newly-elected British Labour government set up a Social Exclusion Unit, in recognition of the non-economic dimensions of living in poverty.⁵

Despite growing recognition of the value of these insights and alternative approaches, the point that non-income determinants of wealth and well-being are persistently undervalued by conventional poverty assessment methodologies remains valid. For example, one obvious implication of the now well-established relationship in rural Africa between poverty indicators and "remoteness" (IFAD 2001; Bird *et al.* 2002) – in terms of community distance from roads, urban centres and social services – is that household-level poverty outcomes are significantly influenced by differential access to schools, clinics, piped water and so on, yet the value of these services (whether subsidised or freely provided) is rarely factored into models of household income.

The methodological culmination of the multi-dimensional view of poverty is the rapid rise to prominence since the 1980s of a family of "participatory" approaches to poverty assessment that include Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) (Chambers 1994; 1997), Participatory Action Research (Rahman

⁴ The "social" dimension of this concept of poverty is captured by the term "underclass", which has been applied pejoratively to a subset of the poor – often from ethnic minorities – in industrialised countries since the 1980s. 'This subgroup, usually residing in a geographically concentrated inner city area, is characterised by persistent and often inter-generational poverty, dependency on social benefits, chronic unemployment and a weak or non-existent link to the formal labour market, and a series of socially dysfunctional or pathological attributes such as violent and criminal behaviour, substance abuse, adolescent pregnancy and unwed parenting' (Kamerman and Kahn 1997: 88).

⁵ The Social Exclusion Unit describes social exclusion as 'a shorthand term for what can happen when people or areas suffer from a combination of linked problems such as unemployment, poor skills, low incomes, poor housing, high crime environments, bad health and family breakdown' (www.socialexclusionunit.gov.uk/, accessed 11.2.03).

1993), and Participatory Learning and Action (PLA) (Pretty *et al.* 1995). The reification of participatory approaches in current development research is evidenced from World Bank efforts in recent years to incorporate these methods in their poverty analysis – most recently in the *Voices of the Poor* (Narayan *et al.* 2000) exercise that fed into the 2000/01 ‘World Development Report’ on *Attacking Poverty* (World Bank 2000); but also in a series of “Participatory Poverty Assessments” (PPAs) implemented in more than 60 countries during the 1990s (Robb 1999). Interestingly, in the light of the comment above that surveys tend to exclude social goods and services from the analysis of household incomes, PPAs have helped to focus attention on the importance of health and education services in protecting people against destitution.

PPAs established that while poverty manifests as material deprivation – hunger, the lack of food, shelter, clothing – the poor also highlight common psychological and political dimensions to poverty. [. . .] whereas official accounts of poverty highlight the “social gap”, that is, the difference between rich and poor in indicators of educational, health or other standards of attainment, the poor rarely have such a static view of what is required in their lives. For instance, lack of access to affordable, effective health care is dreaded, not just as a source of “ill health”, important though that is, but as a source of vulnerability and, ultimately, destitution.

(Craig and Porter 2003: 59)

After a struggle throughout the 1990s for hegemonic dominance between quantitative (questionnaire-based) and qualitative (participatory) approaches, an uneasy reconciliation has now been reached whereby some econometricians recognise the value of qualitative methods (see White 2002), and some qualitative researchers in return are acknowledging the value of statistics.⁶

One methodology that already attempts to bridge the methodological divide is the ‘Food Economy Approach’, which uses participatory methods such as wealth ranking to generate percentages of “better-off”, “middle”, “poor” and “very poor” households in the community, proportions of household income or food consumption derived from various sources, even food aid requirements in emergency contexts (Seaman 2000). As with other qualitative methods, the Food Economy Approach has been criticised as lacking cross-sectional comparability, since it generates relative measures of well-being within a community rather than “objective” poverty headcounts. On the other hand, by dividing a territory into ‘food economy zones’ (FEZ) and generating data at the FEZ level, this approach has partly circumvented the difficulties that participatory methods often face in “scaling up” from communities to higher levels of aggregation.

⁶ Two current examples of the ways in which “quantitative” and “qualitative” social scientists are attempting to work constructively towards devising integrated methodologies: (1) in May 2004, a conference will be held at the University of Toronto, with the title ‘Q-Squared in Practice: A Conference on Experiences of Combining Qualitative and Quantitative Methods in Poverty Appraisal’, which follows on a March 2001 workshop titled ‘Qual-Quant’ at Cornell University (Kanbur 2001); (2) an ongoing project known colloquially as ‘Party Numbers’ is – among other objectives – investigating the potential for generating credible, robust and generalisable statistics from qualitative approaches (Holland, forthcoming).

The third thread of interest is the analysis of chronic *versus* transitory poverty. One reason for the resurgence of academic and policy interest in the temporal dimension of poverty was a series of studies in the late 1990s on “poverty dynamics”, which concluded that economic mobility around the poverty line was much larger than previous notions of the poor as a static, “lumpen” category had implied.⁷ In 2001, the UK’s Department for International Development [DFID] supported the establishment of a Chronic Poverty Research Centre [CPRC] at the University of Manchester, to investigate the specific characteristics, experiences and needs of people living in long-term poverty in developing countries. Interestingly, although the CPRC research team ‘hypothesised that chronic poverty will also often be multi-dimensional and severe’, they identified ‘long duration . . . as both necessary and sufficient for poverty to be considered chronic’ (Hulme *et al.* 2001: 2). The defining feature of chronic poverty, therefore, is not its severity, but its *persistence* over time.⁸

It is argued here that this preoccupation with chronic *versus* transitory poverty risks deflecting attention from the *severity* or depth of poverty, onto the *temporal* duration of subsisting in poverty. This is a curious turn for poverty research to take. Clearly, it has some important policy relevance, not least for targeting. If large numbers of people are constantly moving in and out of poverty – or “churning” around the poverty line – how can policy-makers hit this moving target with their targeted resource transfer instruments? Similarly, uncertainty about the absolute numbers living in poverty calls into question the empirical basis of the Millennium Development Goals, and may partly motivate the current trend among the international community for backing away from precisely specified “goals” and “targets” towards a fuzzier focus on “trends” and “scenarios”.

As long ago as 1981, Amartya Sen cautioned against a focus on headcount poverty, warning that it could distort the allocation of public resources towards the moderately poor rather than the poorest of the poor.

In the head-count measure, the starving wreck counts no more than the barely poor . . . With the use of the head-count measure of poverty, the best rewards to poverty-removal policies are almost always obtained by concentrating on the people who are *just* below the poverty line rather than on those suffering from deep poverty.

(Sen 1981: 157)

The implicit focus of headcount targets on “moderate” rather than “severe” poverty – what Michael Lipton once described as “the poor” and “the ultra-poor” (Lipton 1988) and what the Wollo Destitution Study (Devereux *et al.* 2003; Sharp *et al.* 2003) calls the “vulnerable” and the “destitute” – should be a matter of grave concern for policy-makers genuinely empathetic about the plight of people living in abject

⁷ See the special issue of the *Journal of Development Studies*, Vol 36 No 6, edited by Baulch and Hoddinott (2000); also Haddad and Ahmed (2003).

⁸ See Yaqub (2002: 6): ‘Chronic *absolute* poverty (CAP) refers to the persistently poor and chronic *relative* poverty (CRP) the persistently poorest’.

deprivation. In earlier development discourse, the distinction between levels or degrees of poverty was a central preoccupation, but one that has inexplicably receded into the background in recent years.

. . . two levels of want have existed in Africa for several centuries. On one level have been the very large numbers – perhaps most Africans at most times – obliged to struggle continuously to preserve themselves and their dependants from physical want. These will be called the poor. On another level have been smaller numbers who have permanently or temporarily failed in that struggle and have fallen into physical want. These will be called the very poor or destitute. Of course, there was no sharp dividing line between them. Yet the distinction has cross-cultural validity. It existed in ancient Greece. It was identified by Charles Booth's pioneer study of London during the 1880s, which defined the poor as those 'living under a struggle to obtain the necessaries of life and make both ends meet' and the very poor as those who 'live in a state of chronic want'. The distinction between *pauvre* and *indigent* was drawn in early modern France, where 'both *pauvre* and *indigent* knew hunger, but the *indigent* were never free from it'. In Africa the distinction existed in some, but not all, pre-colonial languages and has appeared frequently since.

(Iliffe 1987: 2)

Reporting on a survey of destitution in five Indian states, Jean Drèze (2002) describes the "destitute" in India in ways that both resonate with and differ from descriptions of severe poverty in sub-Saharan Africa. One important difference is that "social exclusion" appears to play a larger role, in general, in India than in Africa. Drèze points out that there are

millions of households in rural India that might be described as "destitute". These households typically have no able-bodied adult member and no regular source of income. They survive by doing a variety of informal activities such as gathering food from the village commons, making baskets, selling minor forest produce and keeping the odd goat. [. . .] We were shocked to find that even in prosperous villages some households lived in conditions of extreme poverty and hunger. A casual visitor is unlikely to notice them, as destitute households keep a low profile and are often socially invisible. But if you look for them, you will find them, quietly struggling to earn their next meal or patiently starving in a dark mud hut. From this, one point is clear: destitute households cannot rely on spontaneous community support. Social security arrangements are needed. As things stand, however, destitute households are beyond the pale of most development programmes and welfare schemes. They are unable to participate in rural employment programmes, if available. Getting a bank loan is for most of them beyond the realm of possibility. Even "self-help groups" tend to shun them.

In the late 1990s, bilateral donors and multilateral agencies turned their attention to poverty reduction as the overarching goal of all development interventions, and the policy discourse settled on the Millennium Development Goals – headlined by the target of halving global poverty by 2015 (United Nations 2000) –

and on Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSPs) as the principal policy instrument for achieving these goals. This has generated an academic cottage industry around quantitative methodologies for counting and tracking the poor – for purposes of monitoring progress towards achievement of the MDGs (see White 1999; IMF *et al.* 2000; Sahn and Stifel 2003) – as well as a technical debate about the accuracy of global poverty headcounts based on the definition and cross-country comparability of poverty lines (Ravallion 2002; Reddy and Pogge 2002; UNCTAD 2002).

In the context of these academic debates concerning “chronic *versus* transitory” poverty and “quantitative *versus* qualitative” methodologies, the concept of “destitution” brings some important insights, and unresolved questions, to both issues.

Firstly, because of its associations with social exclusion, as discussed above, destitution has broader connotations than income or consumption poverty. In the definition developed for the Wollo Destitution Study (see below), one component is “dependence on transfers”, which implies a reliance on social capital. But this raises questions of interpretation: some transfers (e.g. food aid) are delivered “anonymously” – there is no relationship between donor and beneficiary – so they do not draw on social capital *per se*. The notion of social capital therefore needs to be unpacked: if *private* social capital is the personalised network of extended family and community, then *public* social capital is the institutionalised support provided to the poor by welfarist functions of government, donors and NGOs. Social capital can also go either way: people are destitute when they are forced to depend on the generosity of others for their survival, or people are destitute because their social networks fail to provide adequate protection against “normal” poverty and livelihood shocks, so the individual or household falls from moderate poverty into absolute destitution.

Secondly, there is a danger that the preoccupation of the international community with reducing headcount poverty focuses too much methodological attention on the definition and measurement of the poverty line – an intrinsically arbitrary construct – and too much policy attention on moving people who might be described as the “richest of the poor” from just below to just above the poverty line, thereby deflecting attention away from the “poorest of the poor”.⁹ In technical terms, the consequence is too much policy attention on P_0 (the poverty headcount) and not enough on P_1 (the poverty gap) and P_2 (poverty severity). A crude implication of this focus on the poverty line is that donor resources might gravitate towards large countries with large numbers of moderately poor people (e.g. China and India) – especially as the MDG target date of 2015 approaches – and away from smaller countries with higher proportions of their population living in severe poverty or destitution (such as Ethiopia), where the unit cost of raising individuals above the poverty line is much greater and the returns to donor investments are, in this sense, much lower.

⁹ In India, “BPLs” (people surviving “below the poverty line”) have become a named category for targeting purposes by policy-makers.

3 Defining destitution

Destitution is defined as extreme poverty.

(Williams 2000: 1)¹⁰

Destitution is popularly understood as meaning a state of poverty so severe that the individual concerned is dependent for their survival on the goodwill of others, including charity from the public or welfare support from the state or non-governmental agencies. Common categories of destitute people include beggars, people with disabilities without family support, and victims of natural disasters such as a drought-triggered famine. In the contemporary British context, destitution as a label attaches mainly to the homeless – people who sleep on the streets and sell the *Big Issue* magazine outside supermarkets. Common to these images is the idea that the destitute have nothing – no work, no savings, no possessions, but also no home to go to, no family or friends to turn to – i.e., very few *material* assets, but no *social* assets either.

The Oxford English Dictionary (OED) lists four definitions of “destitution”, including: ‘The condition of being destitute of resources; want of the necessaries of life’. The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language defines destitution as ‘complete poverty’. Interestingly, another OED definition is ‘the action of deserting or forsaking’ which suggests social marginalisation and the individualisation of destitution as a human experience. This is echoed in the definition of “destitute” as ‘Forsaken, left friendless or helpless, forlorn’. Other OED definitions of “destitute” include: ‘One who is destitute, without friends, resources, or the means of subsistence’, and ‘Bereft of power to do something’, which together capture the sense of destitution as economic, social and political powerlessness.

In the poverty literature, a distinction is typically drawn between the working poor, who suffer from *low productivity* (=chronic poverty) or *vulnerability* (= transitory poverty), and the non-working poor (or destitute), who suffer from *dependency* on transfers. Although poverty is often seen as an economic problem to be solved through income generation and investment in employment creation, destitution is generally relegated to the social welfare domain. Welfarist definitions of destitution focus on citizens who are unable to work for a living (e.g. the elderly, people with disabilities, the chronically ill) and lack independent means of support (i.e. they are neither living as dependents in households nor being cared for by relatives). A welfarist definition motivates public support mechanisms, or private charity.

An economist might measure destitution empirically as (say) the bottom 20 per cent of the population. This is a “marginalist” definition: the destitute are not qualitatively different from other poor people, just marginally more poor. A classic example of a marginalist definition is Michael Lipton’s distinction between the “poor” and the “ultra-poor” (which is perhaps synonymous with “destitute”). The poor are those households who are unable to meet their minimum subsistence needs despite spending 60 per cent or more of their incomes on food, while the “ultra-poor” or “absolutely poor” cannot meet their minimum subsistence needs, despite spending 80 per cent or more of their incomes on food (Lipton

¹⁰ Kyle Williams is an American from Tennessee who experienced destitution in the 1990s, which he claims to have overcome by ‘a positive attitude’ and ‘help from others’.

1988). The problem with this approach is that thresholds such as 60 per cent or 80 per cent are essentially arbitrary: there is no objective basis for classifying someone who spends 59 per cent of their income on food as “non-poor” and someone who spends 60 per cent on food as “poor”. Similar critiques apply to absolute rather than relative definitions, such as the World Bank’s “dollar a day” criterion or a kilocalorie food consumption level. However, these internationally agreed norms do have the advantage of cross-country comparability; there is a conspicuous absence of a similar consensus on the definition and measurement of destitution.

One way in which destitution is fundamentally distinct from income or consumption-based measures of poverty is in its focus on assets and assetlessness. Several “food economy assessments” and “participatory poverty assessments” conducted recently in rural Ethiopia suggest that the “poorest of the poor” are those who face severe labour, land and livestock constraints, which make their livelihoods more precarious than other poor households. Communities often identify “thresholds” of asset ownership that differentiate wealthy, middle income, poor and very poor households, with the “very poor” lacking almost entirely in productive assets – they have no livestock, they rent out their land, they have no more than two working members, they depend on relief in most years. Landlessness in Wollo is closely associated with vulnerability to destitution (Devereux *et al.* 2003). Similarly, in rural India rising numbers of landless households over time signifies increasing destitution at the community level (Mohanty 1996: 85).

It is often asserted that the poor do at least have one asset – their labour power. In India, according to Mohanty (1996), destitute households are more likely than others to resort to child labour. This may be even more pronounced in Ethiopia than in India: according to one recent study, rural Ethiopia has the highest child labour participation rates in the world (CSAE 1999: 26). On the other hand, destitution in Wollo is disproportionately associated with single-person households who lack even their own labour power, such as elderly widows living alone (Sharp *et al.* 2003: 79).¹¹ This resonates with Dasgupta’s (1993: 475) definition of ‘economic disenfranchisement . . . as the inability to participate in the labour market’. Exclusion from the labour market is identified as a primary route to destitution.

More broadly, these findings point to a conceptual overlap between destitution and lack of assets, as Bevan (2000: 5) elaborates in her definition of destitution in Ethiopia: ‘Those with few assets (broadly defined to include social, cultural and political assets) are either currently income poor or vulnerable. Those with no assets may be described as *destitute*’.

In contrast to marginalist approaches, a “structuralist” definition would incorporate notions of qualitative distinctions (e.g. class-based) between destitution and “normal” poverty: destitute people are somehow recognisably different. A sociological definition, for example, would extend beyond economic proxies for ill-being to incorporate indicators of social status, social exclusion and marginalisation. An entitlements-based definition (Sen 1981) would suggest that a destitute person is one whose production-plus labour-plus trade-based entitlements are inadequate to generate subsistence, and who therefore

¹¹ See also Sharp (2003) on the “household labour capacity index” and “real dependency ratio”.

derives a sizeable proportion of her/his livelihood from “transfer-based entitlements”, either public or private.

In his book, *An Inquiry into Well-being and Destitution*, the Cambridge economist Partha Dasgupta defines destitution as ‘an extreme condition of ill-being’ or ‘extreme commodity deprivation’, which results in a failure to meet a ‘basic minimum living standard’ or ‘basic physiological needs’ (Dasgupta 1993: viii). This notion of destitution is closely related to the notion of inability to meet “basic needs”. Although individual requirements may vary, a common basket of “fundamental commodity needs” can be identified – nutrition, shelter, potable water, sanitation, fuel, health care – lack of access to which is a defining characteristic of being destitute. Importantly, Dasgupta (1993: 14) emphasises that destitution is persistent or chronic deprivation rather than transitory or acute deprivation: ‘chronic undernourishment, not starvation [. . .] the landless do not starve when they fail to obtain jobs in agriculture. They are *destitute* and become undernourished’. This shifts the focus of inquiry away from the preoccupation of economists with measuring *current* income or consumption levels. Dasgupta (1993: viii) also favours an individualised notion of destitution: ‘Destitution is first and foremost a personal calamity’.

In the Indian literature, “destitution” is contrasted with “prosperity” and “privilege”, and is equated with “marginalisation” and “economic insecurity” (Mohanty 1996: 81). The concept of marginalisation brings elements of social exclusion and political powerlessness into the analysis that are conspicuously absent from standard poverty analyses. Harriss-White (2002: 2) also analyses destitution as ‘an economic, social and political phenomenon’, and argues that *economic* destitution – defined as ‘the absence of any control over assets and the loss of access to income from one’s own labour’ – is ‘a contradiction in terms because the complete absence of assets and income spells death’.

The strength of Harriss-White’s definition is in combining the notion of economic destitution (‘having almost nothing’) with the notion of social and political destitution (‘being almost nothing’) (Harriss-White 2002:7). The problem with this concept, which is defined as ‘an *individual* phenomenon’, is that it is both too broad and too narrow. It appears to include dependent household members, for instance – those who lack assets, independent income and labour power – but to exclude those members of society popularly perceived as destitute – such as street beggars and the chronically ill – who depend on the benevolence of others (formal social insurance mechanisms, or informal charity) for their survival.

A similar confusion is found in the Ethiopian context. In critiquing an observation by the national Disaster Prevention and Preparedness Commission, that ‘households in low productivity areas [are] living on the edge of *destitution*’, Stephen (2000: 7) argues that people should not be classified as destitute if they have social networks to fall back upon.

Destitute means ‘to be extremely poor and lacking the means to provide for oneself’ [. . .] Certainly the people in Delanta are poor, all of the economic statistics tell us that. But whether they are truly lacking and unable to fend for themselves as the word destitution entails is another matter. Some of the literature on vulnerability to food insecurity in Ethiopian agrarian systems indicates that an important element in rural survival is the *economy of affection*, a complex mix of production activities

and social exchange. [. . .] whether rural people are truly on the edge of destitution as the Ethiopian government suggests, is questionable in the presence of social networks.

Destitution can be a result of either slow, long-term processes or short-term livelihood shocks. In the famine literature, destitution is well established as both a part of the process and an outcome. The current conventional wisdom, that humanitarian interventions should “save livelihoods, not just lives”, exemplifies the understanding of famine as a process that first impoverishes people before it kills them. Effective famine prevention therefore means protecting assets and incomes, not waiting until people have eroded their assets through distress sales and have no viable post-famine future. In his analysis of the Ethiopian famine of 1972–4, Sen (1981: 98–100) discusses ‘the sequence of destitution’, lists ‘the destitution groups’, and describes famine outcomes in terms of ‘both mortality and economic destitution’. Similarly, de Waal’s book on the Darfur, Sudan famine of 1984/85 includes four chapters that analyse the famine as a sequential process: “Drought”, “Hunger”, “Destitution”, “Death” (de Waal 1989). Writing on the 1980s famine in Wollo, Walker (1989: 25) notes that: ‘When the drought of 1983–4 hit, hundreds of thousands of people were rendered destitute and had to rely on food aid for survival’.

Walker proposes a definition of famine that emphasises not starvation and mass mortality, but the process of destitution that threatens survival. ‘Famine is a socio-economic process which causes the accelerated destitution of the most vulnerable, marginal and least powerful groups in a community, to a point where they can no longer, as a group, maintain a sustainable livelihood’ (Walker 1989: 143).

Following from this discussion, our working definition of destitution is the following:

Destitution is a state of extreme poverty that results from the pursuit of “unsustainable livelihoods”, meaning that a series of livelihood shocks and/or negative trends or processes erodes the asset base of already poor and vulnerable households until they are no longer able to meet their *minimum subsistence needs*, they lack access to the *key productive assets* needed to escape from poverty, and they become *dependent* on public and/or private transfers.

Three important points emerge from this definition. First, while agreeing with Dasgupta’s focus on inability to meet “minimum subsistence needs” as a defining outcome indicator of destitution, our emphasis is on the resources needed to construct a viable livelihood. This focus on “assetlessness” distinguishes our measurement of destitution from conventional measurements of poverty, which emphasise incomes (typically proxied by expenditure and/or consumption). Second, we emphasise “access to”, rather than “ownership of”, key productive assets such as land and livestock, since defining poverty or destitution in terms of levels of asset *ownership* may be misleading. For instance, especially where population pressure has made individualised ownership of livestock impractical, and sharing or loan arrangements dominate, *access* to draught power is a more critical determinant of farm output than ownership of a pair of draught animals. This focus on access to productive resources is in keeping with the “sustainable livelihoods” framework (discussed below), which assesses the capability of individuals or

households to construct and sustain a viable livelihood over a period of time, not on the outcomes in terms of actual food produced or income earned at a point in time.

Third, our definition includes a notion of ‘lack of access to the key productive assets needed to escape from poverty’, which introduces a distinction between actual and potential incomes that needs to be explained. Consider two poor households at the same level of income and asset ownership, except that one household has “surplus labour” that it cannot sell for wage income due to lack of employment opportunities, while the other is labour-constrained. If a public works programme was introduced the first household could use its labour power to increase its income and consumption – it is therefore poor but not destitute – while the second household could not benefit from this opportunity and would remain poor because of its assetlessness – it is therefore destitute. At the community or regional level, farming households might increase their farm yields if they enjoyed land tenure security, but at present they are not maximising returns to their natural assets, because of an unfavourable policy environment. More broadly, the poor might benefit from positive policy changes – the lifting of institutional, legal or customary constraints on livelihoods – while the destitute cannot and will require redistributive asset transfers (such as restocking of livestock herds) if they are to escape destitution. In the short term, as our definition suggests, the destitute are likely to remain dependent on gratuitous relief assistance to meet their immediate daily consumption needs.

Operationalising this definition raises a range of empirical difficulties and questions. Are “destitutes” visibly and qualitatively different from other poor individuals and households? If so, then robust proxy indicators can be devised to identify and target the destitute in any given context – e.g. female-headed households, people with disabilities. If not, what are the *thresholds* or cut-off points (for asset-holdings or incomes) between “destitutes” and “non-destitutes”? Destitution is an absolute rather than relative concept, but the resources required to construct a viable livelihood obviously vary across livelihood systems (e.g. pastoralists need more livestock than crop farmers) and even across geographical space within the same livelihood system (the minimum land needed to produce a year’s food supply for an Ethiopian family differs between highland and lowland areas). Livelihood diversification further complicates the analysis: a rural household may lack the minimum agricultural inputs (land, draught power, labour) and yet survive through combining farming with off-farm income earning activities in the dry season. To take a starker example, a widow may appear to lack any productive assets, yet she may enjoy a higher and more stable level of food consumption than her farming neighbours if she has a son or daughter who works in town and regularly remits food or income. Clearly, the identification of a minimum basket of productive assets (say, 0.5 hectares of land + access to a pair of draught oxen + two adult labour equivalents for a highland farming household) as a threshold for classifying households as destitute is unsatisfactory. Identifying the destitute is more complicated than it at first appears.

4 Local concepts of destitution in Ethiopia

Pre-twentieth century Ethiopia was a highly unequal society, with large numbers of chronically poor people. According to John Iliffe (1987: 9–10) ‘The Ethiopian poor were innumerable and ubiquitous. [. . .] as in early medieval Europe, the very poor were chiefly the incapacitated’. These included ‘cripples, blind men, and lepers’,¹² as well as people afflicted with epilepsy, polio and other disabling diseases. Old age was not specifically associated with poverty, but being widowed was. ‘Widowhood, on the other hand, was a common consequence of insecurity and early marriage which led many women into poverty’ (Iliffe 1987: 11). Despite this proliferation of forms of poverty, few Amharic words were used to describe “poverty” and “destitution”:

. . . by the seventeenth century, at least, Ethiopians used two words (apparently interchangeably) to mean poor, *meskin* and *deba*, in addition to a rich vocabulary describing various kinds of poor (orphans, blind, etc.). It is interesting that neither *meskin* nor *deba* specifically connoted lack of wealth, power, or kin, as was often the case with African terms for poverty. *Deba* could mean anyone who worked the land and did not possess a fief. *Meskin* seems to have had an implication of destitution, at least by the twentieth century, but there is no indication that a clear distinction was drawn between the two.

(Iliffe 1987: 27–8)

People practising crafts were socially stigmatised, ‘but were not necessarily poorer than their neighbours’ (Iliffe 1987: 11). This conclusion is confirmed by our study, which found socially stratified communities – blacksmiths, potters and leather-workers confined to one end of the village as “outcasts” – but no discernible differences in material well-being between the groups. In nineteenth century Ethiopia, ‘the very poor were impoverished less by lack of access to land than by lack of access to labour: they were chiefly those incapacitated and bereft of care [. . .] Only in times of disaster did Ethiopia see the destitute families which characterised the land-scarce poverty of early modern Europe’ (Iliffe 1987: 14).

The word “destitute” also carries with it the notion of “the deserving poor”, and Ethiopia has a tradition – drawn from both Christian and Islamic influences – of charitable support to beggars who are perceived as “deserving” the support of those more fortunate than themselves, especially those crippled by illnesses such as leprosy or polio. By contrast, Iliffe (1987) argues that Ethiopia has a weaker tradition of extended family support of the kind commonly found elsewhere in Africa, such as urbanised family members remitting income to their rural kin.¹³ One explanation for this may be the nucleated structure of Ethiopian households. In contrast to, say, West Africa, where extended families often live in compounds

¹² Prejudice against lepers has not disappeared from modern Ethiopia, as the ‘Voices of the Poor’ study found, here quoting a young woman from a rural village: ‘My mother was a leper. So everyone knows that I am the daughter of a leper’s family. Even though the community has not excluded me officially, there is no attempt to accept me as being part of this society. And I also feel so’ (Narayan *et al.* 2000: 247).

¹³ A survey in Addis Ababa in 1960 found that only 20 per cent [121/600] of household heads interviewed were providing support to family members living elsewhere, or rearing the children of relatives (Comhaire-Sylvain 1960, cited in Iliffe 1987: 181).

of up to 50 individuals, the typical Ethiopian household is small and self-contained – comprising a married couple and their children. Iliffe (1987: 15) attributes this to the fact that Amharic social structure is neither matrilineal nor patrilineal, but bilateral, so that individuals are not born into a ‘corporate descent group. [. . .] Bilateral societies are characteristically individualistic and mobile, both socially and geographically. This was so among the Amhara’. This proud individualism is exemplified by this scathingly critical comment by Emperor Haile Selassie. ‘Rich and poor have always existed and always will. Why? Because there are people who work and others who do not work. [. . .] Every individual is responsible for his own misfortune’ (quoted in Iliffe 1987: 211).

Haile Selassie’s remark segregates the (undeserving) “working poor” from the (deserving) “incapacitated poor”, and feudal Ethiopia had more than its fair share of both. While the “incapacitated poor” relied either on family and community support, or migrated to towns and became “professional beggars”, the “working poor” struggled to survive by their own efforts. Iliffe captures these contrasting livelihood strategies succinctly.

Poor people have two strategies of survival. They can struggle for *independence*, scraping a living by any available means. Or they can struggle for *dependence*, seeking the favour of the fortunate. In practice, of course, many alternate between the two strategies, which are not entirely distinct.

(Iliffe 1987:16; emphasis added)

The application of the concept of destitution to able-bodied Ethiopians – and not just to incapacitated “professional” beggars – was first observed in the 1970s, when land pressures started to impose a binding constraint on the ability of smallholder families to meet their subsistence needs. One study in Sidamo, southern Ethiopia in 1980 found that half the households surveyed were farming less than 0.25 hectares, and concluded that: ‘The destitute peasant – and quite a good portion of the peasants in our study are in this position – often has a mini-plot and a small hand tool’ (Dessalegn Rahmato 1985, quoted in Iliffe 1987: 235).

In the early 1980s – when Eritrea was still part of Ethiopia – the EPLF divided poor rural Eritreans into three groups: ‘Those who lacked the equipment to cultivate independently; those who lacked land because they were young or recent immigrants; and ‘those who own land but have no labour power’, characteristically ‘orphans, widowers, old men, and solitary women’ (Gebre-Medhin 1984, cited by Iliffe 1987: 238).

If beggars, lepers and resource-constrained peasants constituted the bulk of Ethiopia’s “chronically destitute” population, then the “transitorily destitute” were those households who were, in Sen’s phrase ‘plunged into starvation’ (Sen 1981: 47) during the periodic droughts and crop failures that regularly produced famines in Ethiopia.¹⁴ Sen vividly describes how destitutes were “created” by the droughts of

¹⁴ “Chronic poverty” and “transitory poverty” are the currently fashionable terms for what earlier analysts categorised as “structural poverty” and “conjunctural poverty” respectively. Neither distinction captures the *depth* of poverty, as is conveyed by the term “destitution”.

the early 1970s. ('While the famine in Wollo and Tigray had by then ebbed [. . .] fresh destitutes were being created elsewhere in the country as the focus of drought moved south' (Sen 1981: 88).) He constructs a "relative destitution index", which identifies the worst affected sub-regions (*awrajas*) of Wollo as those having the highest proportions of their population in relief camps in 1974. "Destitutes" comprised drought-affected farmers and pastoralists, evicted tenants, retrenched servants, craft-workers, and "professional beggars" (Sen 1981: 98). Sen outlines "the sequence of destitution" as including eviction of tenants, livestock sales by *risc* smallholders, large-scale migration to look for work, increased begging, and mass displacement to relief camps.

Apart from the "direct destitution" experienced by crop farmers (caused by harvest failure) and pastoralists (caused by livestock deaths), Sen also describes processes of "derived destitution", affecting those whose incomes depend on those of farmers, such that when their incomes fell: 'Other occupational categories, e.g. weavers, craftsmen, service sellers, urban labourers, and beggars, suffered mostly from straightforward "derived destitution". The economic decline of a large section of the community leads to a shrinkage of demand for commodities sold by other groups, in this case clothing, craft products, services, and even general labour power' (Sen 1981: 103). The potential for droughts and famines to impoverish rural Ethiopians remains a significant cause of destitution to this day.

According to recent "food economy assessments" in the highland areas of Wollo, people who are considered to be worse off than their neighbours are referred to locally as *deba* ("poor"). Another term, *marari*, describes an even worse-off category: those who have essentially become beggars. They cannot meet their food needs even under ideal weather conditions, they suffer seasonal hunger and chronic malnutrition, they depend on food aid and they are acutely vulnerable to famine in years of low or erratic rainfall. Individuals most vulnerable to falling into this category include the "land poor" (*de jure* or *de facto* landless) and the "labour poor" (people with disabilities, the elderly living alone, orphans) (Chapman and Haile Kiros 1999; Haile Kiros *et al.* 2000).

During fieldwork for the Destitution Study in Wollo in 2001/02, efforts were made to capture local understandings and experiences of severe poverty. Although we found no single Amharic word that captures all three elements of our working definition – inability to meet basic needs, lack of assets and dependence on others – the first two elements recurred frequently in the ways that participants in focus group discussions and wealth ranking exercises characterised the situation of the poorest members of their communities (see Table 4.1). The features of extreme poverty which were referred to most often across the study area include a complete lack of assets ('the poor who have nothing'; 'the completely poor'), reaching the end of one's resources ('the poor who have lost everything'), and suffering from chronic hunger ('those who are starving', who 'go to bed hungry', and who 'have nothing to cook except water').

Table 4.1 Local terms and phrases for the poorest group in the community

Local (Amharic) term	Approximate translation
<i>chegeregnoch, cheger tegna</i>	those with problems
<i>chigaregnoch</i>	those who are starving
<i>cherso deha</i>	absolutely / completely poor
<i>(ye) mecheresha deha</i>	the completely poor
<i>(ye) menate deha</i>	extremely poor
<i>minim yelalew</i>	those who have nothing
<i>Trit yale deha</i>	the poor who've lost everything
<i>mulich yale deha</i>	the poor who have nothing
<i>Tsom-adari</i>	people who pass the night fasting / go to bed hungry
<i>wuha anfari</i>	those who "cook" water

Source: Sharp *et al.* (2003: 12).

Several of the terms also suggest that the difference between “the poor who have nothing” and the poor who still have something, however little, is more a difference of degree than of kind. That is, the poorest or destitute in these communities are not seen as categorically different from their neighbours, but are at the bottom of a sliding scale of poverty into which anyone may fall at some time in his or her life. This interpretation was repeatedly confirmed by the discussions around the historical wealth ranking exercise carried out in each of the qualitative sites. According to participants in these discussions, some types of people are at higher risk than others of becoming destitute (the elderly if they do not have children to support them; women who are divorced or widowed; young people with no land). But all people in these groups are not necessarily destitute, and conversely the poorest stratum in all the communities contains people who do not fit these criteria, but who have fallen into destitution through various misfortunes – ill health, accidental loss of livestock, debt, and (most commonly) the cumulative impacts of repeated droughts and poor harvests, unmitigated by alternative income sources or adequate safety nets.¹⁵

Depending on the goodwill of others – whether “begging” neighbours for various types of help or receiving food aid from government and other organisations – was also frequently raised in discussions and was widely recognised as a defining feature of extreme poverty. There was often a stigma of shame or defeat about such dependence for the people we talked to, who contrasted it with the respectable ideal of self-sufficiency and being able to support one’s own household. Several informants mentioned the importance to them of being ‘*tiru deha*’ (‘good poor’, or ‘proud poor’), meaning independent of other people’s help, and not indebted. Thus the phrasing of the self-assessment question in the household survey, which described the poorest category as ‘unable to meet the household’s needs by your own efforts, and unable to survive without support from the community or government’, was found to match well with the informants’ own understanding of degrees of poverty within their communities.

¹⁵ Compare Chambers’ concept of ‘poverty and vulnerability ratchets’: ‘the loss of assets or rights which it is difficult to reverse’ (Chambers 1983: 114–15).

Social capital and informal support networks also emerged from qualitative discussions as crucial determinants of a household's ability to avoid or escape destitution. However, systematic social exclusion – the segregation of the destitute from the activities and institutions of the community – appears to be rare in rural Wollo. Even the very poorest were generally not regarded as separate or different from the rest of the community, although their ability to contribute to or participate in village life may be very limited.¹⁶

5 Analysing destitution

The conceptual framework developed for our analysis of destitution in Wollo is a modified “sustainable livelihoods” approach (Scoones 1998, Ellis 2000). Key features of a livelihoods approach include a focus on *resources* (or “capitals”), and on factors mediating *access* (institutions, organisations and social relations) to the resources needed to construct viable *livelihood strategies* (see Figure 5.1 below). The relative success of these strategies will also be influenced by *contextual* variables (trends, shocks, and the broader economic and political context), over which the individual or household has very little control. The product of all these variables operating in combination will be a livelihood *outcome* that can be characterised as “sustainable”, “vulnerable” or “destitute”.

Livelihood **resources**, assets or “capitals” (column 1 in Figure 5.1) refer to the stock of assets that the household owns or can access in pursuing a livelihood strategy. These assets are usually categorised as natural, physical, human, social and financial capital.¹⁷

Natural capital is defined as *the natural resource stocks from which resource flows useful for livelihoods are derived (e.g. land, water, wildlife, biodiversity, environmental resources)*. In rural Africa, where most livelihoods derive directly or indirectly from the land, people vulnerable to poverty, food insecurity and destitution are those whose access to natural resources is most constrained. In Wollo, pressures on the physical environment appear to be increasing. Some observers argue that a ‘Malthusian crisis’ is developing as landholdings decline with population growth (Aklilu and Tadesse 1994; Holt and Dessalegn 1999). The destitute have no land or very little land: in Dessalegn Rahmato’s phrase, farmers in much of highland Ethiopia are cultivating “starvation plots” (<0.5ha) which can never guarantee even subsistence (Dessalegn 1994). Moreover, some households who were allocated plots during the 1991 land redistribution are unable to farm them because they lack labour power, and are forced to rent out their land for a share of the harvest. In our survey, households classified as destitute lost control over half their land in this way: they “own” 0.55 hectares on average, but they farm only 0.27 hectares (Devereux *et al.* 2003).

¹⁶ Dejene Negassa, focus group discussion notes on the nature and processes of destitution.

¹⁷ The definitions of “capitals” in this section (in italics) come from Carney (1998: 7).

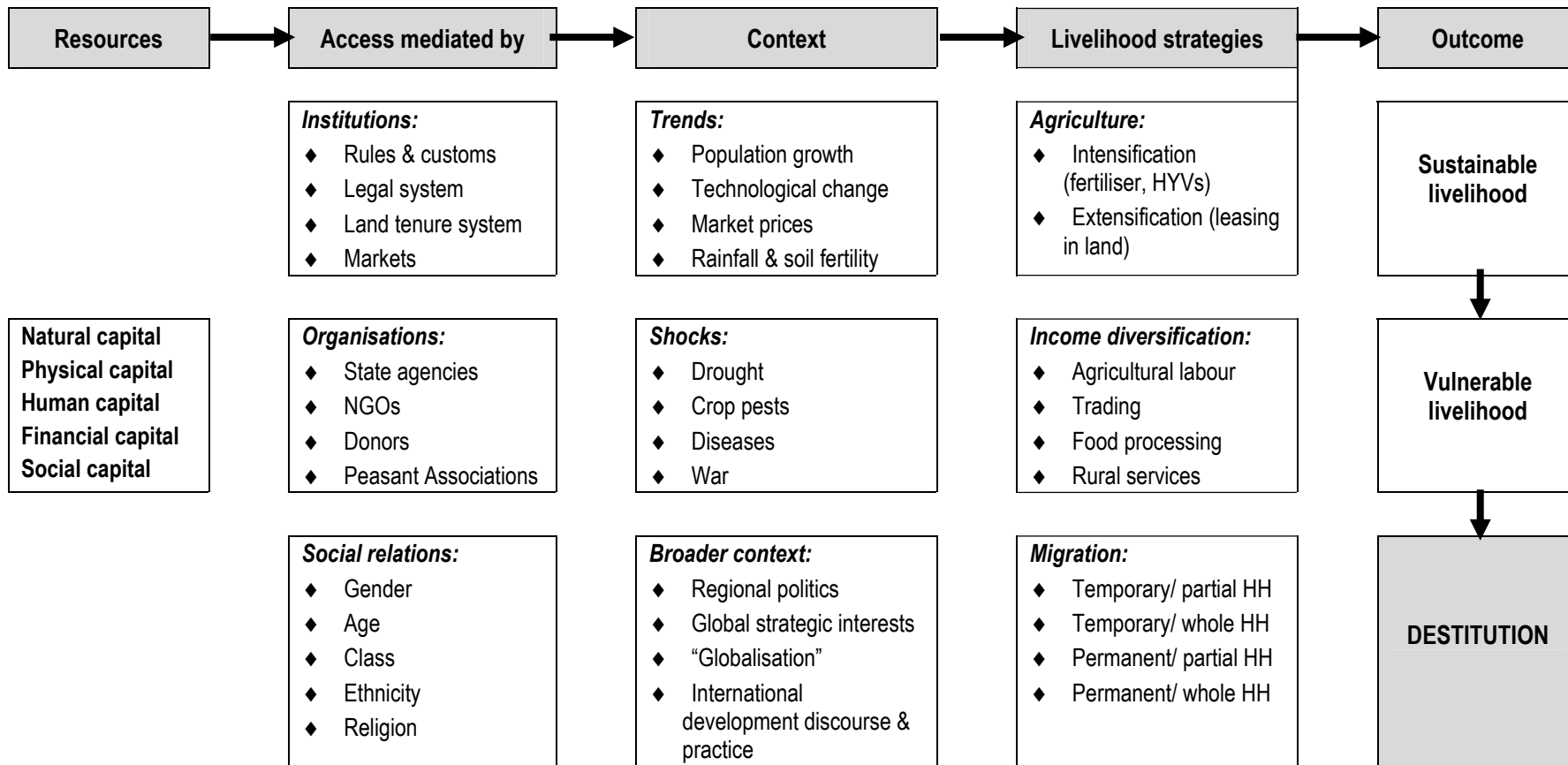
Physical capital includes *the basic infrastructure (transport, shelter, water, energy and communications) and the production equipment and means which enable people to pursue their livelihoods*. Ethiopia has just 90cm of road per person – one of the world’s lowest (Webb and von Braun 1994) – and we have seen above that poverty is closely associated with limited access to infrastructure (roads, transport, communications), and remoteness from towns and markets. A recent survey in South Wollo confirmed that opportunities for earning off-farm incomes ‘expand with greater proximity to towns and market centres’ (Yared et al. 2000: 22). A strong finding from the Destitution Study was that communities within half a day’s walk of a town were generally better off than those further away, which motivated a recommendation for substantial investment in physical infrastructure, especially roads, and in promoting the growth of small towns throughout Wollo (Sharp et al. 2003).

Human capital means *the skills, knowledge, ability to labour and good health important to the ability to pursue different livelihood strategies*. Adult literacy rates in Amhara Region, at 24 per cent for males and 8 per cent for females, are lower than the national averages (at 36 per cent for males and 17 per cent for females), while female literacy in Wag Hamra (at just 0.8 per cent) is the lowest in the country (CSA 1999: 91). Children in Amhara Region display some of the highest levels of malnutrition in the country, with 65 per cent being stunted in 1998 (against the national figure of 55 per cent) and 71 per cent of under-fives in Wag Hamra being underweight (against a national estimate of 45 per cent) (CSA 1999: 135). Low levels of human capital are both a cause and a consequence of destitution: ill-health and malnutrition reduce labour productivity, while illiteracy reduces access to off-farm employment, trapping the poor in a dangerous dependence on rain-fed agriculture from generation to generation.

Social capital derives from *the social resources (networks, membership of groups, relationships of trust, access to wider institutions of society) upon which people draw in pursuit of livelihoods*. Destitution should be understood in terms of not only inadequate access to income and assets, but also restricted social claims and limited access to local sharing arrangements and redistributive mechanisms. The destitute in Wollo are excluded from many social activities and community-based associations. They are unable to afford the time or contribute towards the costs of certain religious ceremonies. Destitution that is related to labour constraints leaves them unable to benefit from reciprocal labour exchanges. Since there is evidence that destitution is increasing at the community level (Devereux et al. 2003), access to assistance – gifts, loans, access to productive assets such as draught oxen – from informal social support mechanisms is also said to be declining: ‘... hard times erode the ability of people to engage in sharing and self-help. Giving becomes less generous and more focused on one’s immediate social network’ (Yared et al. 2000: 7).

Financial capital describes *the financial resources which are available to people (whether savings, supplies of credit or regular remittances or pensions) and which provide them with different livelihood options*. Formal financial services are almost non-existent in Wollo. Agricultural credit in the form of inputs packages (seeds and fertilisers) has been provided to farmers by Ministry of Agriculture extension workers, but defaults occur for several reasons: inability to repay following drought-triggered crop failure, loan diversion to non-agricultural uses (e.g. food needs, health expenses, social ceremonies), and lack of markets for produce (Ayelegn and Shirega 2000; Belay and Belay 1998). Farmers are often forced into selling their food production at low post-harvest prices to repay their agricultural loans, while farmers who fail to repay have been imprisoned. Because of general poverty, access to informal credit – for consumption needs, start-up or working capital for small enterprises – is also limited. Only 29 per cent of 300 households surveyed in Wollo in 1999 had taken a loan during the previous year, though many more had tried. Half of these loans came from relatives and the rest mainly from rural credit associations (FSCO 1999: 23). Local informal savings clubs (*equb*) demonstrate a limited potential for accumulation: savings are spent mainly on food and clothing (Aspen 1993: 79).

Figure 5.1 A livelihoods approach to conceptualising destitution



Source: Adapted from Scoones (1998) and Ellis (2000).

Destitution is a multi-faceted process and outcome. In contrast to conventional analyses of poverty that enumerate incomes and attach market values to physical assets owned by households, we argue that destitution arises from low and deteriorating stocks of – and access to – all types of material and intangible assets and “capitals”, at the community as well as the household levels. This was confirmed by the Destitution Study in rural Wollo, which found specifically that access to land, labour and livestock were the dominant determinants of livelihood viability.¹⁸ This resonates with a series of food economy assessments conducted by Save the Children (UK) in farming communities in the Ethiopian highlands, which consistently identified three critical determinants of relative wealth and household food security status: farm size, availability of family labour, and access to draught power (Boudreau 1998; Chapman and Haile Kiros 1999; Haile Kiros *et al.* 2000). As household landholdings and livestock ownership fall inexorably across this region, the most food insecure households are the labour constrained: female- and elderly-headed households, people with disabilities, and households affected by HIV/AIDS.¹⁹

The second column in Figure 5.1 identifies those *institutions, organisations and social relations* that mediate access to assets. Access to productive assets can derive from individualised ownership – the strongest form of access – but households that do not own key productive assets can also access them through informal local sharing arrangements (e.g. *yerber* for livestock in Wollo), and markets (e.g. land leasing, agricultural labour). Of course, institutions and social relations can also impose barriers to resource access: for instance, inflexible land tenure systems may prevent people from settling and farming where they choose, and patriarchal norms may exclude women from lucrative income earning opportunities (gendered labour market segmentation). Formal organisations are also involved in facilitating access to resources in rural areas. In rural Wollo these include government Ministries (Agriculture, Health, Education, DPPC), donors and NGOs (WFP, Save the Children (UK), SOS Sahel and others) and local Peasant Associations.

The forces resulting in destitution operate at the micro (individual and household), “meso” (community and zonal) and macro (national and international) levels. At the individual and household levels, the main determinant of relative wealth or poverty is ownership of and access to productive assets. However, access to and utilisation of these resources are mediated by environmental conditions and institutional constraints and opportunities that impinge on individuals at higher (community, regional and national) levels. Relevant environmental and demographic shocks and trends in Wollo include recurrent droughts and *belg* rains failure, declining soil fertility, population pressure and HIV/AIDS. Any analysis of

¹⁸ A Principal Components Analysis of 15 variables derived from our household survey placed indicators of access to land, labour and livestock in six of the first seven positions, in terms of their contribution to a derived “destitution index” (Sharp 2003). (The other variables related to social capital, financial capital, and several “basic needs” indicators reflecting household access to food, clothing, shelter, and a few basic items of recurrent cash expenditure.)

¹⁹ Not only does HIV/AIDS remove economically active adults from the labour force, the costs of the disease often exceed annual household income (Bollinger *et al.* 1999: 4). The death of adult males is associated with a rise in female-headed households and a fall in farm yields. In the Destitution Study, chronic illness or death of productive adults emerged as a factor precipitating destitution for many households (Devereux *et al.* 2003, Chapter 8).

destitution must take into account these trends and processes over time, including the broader socio-economic and political *contexts* that facilitate or constrain livelihood potentials and outcomes (column 3 of Figure 5.1).

As Dasgupta argues, ‘no account of destitution can get off the ground unless it includes an analysis of the forces that bring about states of affairs where a large proportion of people can be destitutes . . . sub-Saharan destitution cannot be traced to any single source . . . the extent of government accountability, the reach of civil liberties, and the functioning of market mechanisms are connected’ Dasgupta (1993: 8, 139). In recent Ethiopian history, the rural population has been exposed to several dramatic political and economic shocks – the 1974 famine and subsequent overthrow of Haile Selassie, the 1984 famine, the punitive policies of the Derg including forced resettlement and land redistribution, civil war throughout the 1980s and border conflicts with Eritrea since the mid-1990s, market liberalisation – which have all created a climate of policy uncertainty and discontinuity that has exacerbated vulnerability and impoverishment of many Ethiopians (Devereux and Sharp 2003).

Within the context of resource availability and access, household livelihood *strategies* in rural areas include agricultural intensification (increasing farm yields) and “extensification” (increasing farm size); income diversification (engaging in a range of off-farm economic activities); and migration (either temporary or permanent, partial or whole household) (Scoones 1998). Typically, rural livelihood portfolios involve a combination of two or more sources of food and income – crop production supplemented by off-farm income-earning activities – because returns to each individual activity are too low and too unreliable. But livelihoods in rural Ethiopia are remarkably undifferentiated. Smallholder agriculture employed 89 per cent of the national labour force in 1997 and accounted for over 90 per cent of total crop area and agricultural output (Bollinger *et al.* 1999). Access to alternative sources of incomes is limited, and most off-farm activities generate little supplementary income (RESAL 2000).

Our conceptualisation of destitution is as a state or process resulting in “unsustainable livelihoods”. This unfavourable *outcome* can occur because the productive resources available to households are inadequate to generate subsistence production or income, or because institutional barriers constrain access to resources, or because the livelihood strategy pursued is simply unviable. As argued above, access to agricultural inputs is a major determinant of household incomes in rural Wollo, where the destitute are those who lack land, labour and livestock. Rain-fed agriculture is also a highly risky way of making a living. Crop production is unpredictable due to erratic weather, which has triggered famines in Ethiopia for centuries, most having their epicentre in the northeastern highlands – Wollo and Tigray. Farmers in Wollo identify erratic rainfall – rains start too late or stop too early; rainfall is too little or too heavy – as the primary problem affecting their farm yields (FSCO 1999: 15).

An unsustainable livelihood is contrasted in Figure 5.1 with a “sustainable livelihood” outcome – meaning that the livelihood strategy pursued generates adequate food and income and is resilient against shocks such as drought – and with a “vulnerable livelihood”, which is adequate in good times but not resilient against adverse shocks and trends. Households pursuing unsustainable livelihoods will be

permanently dependent on external assistance, vulnerable households or individuals will need support only in bad times, while those households that enjoy sustainable livelihoods will never need assistance (except in extreme circumstances) and should not be targeted for relief.

6 Conclusion

The understanding of “destitution” which has emerged from this conceptual review and from our fieldwork in Wollo has several salient features. Destitution is characterised as primarily a crisis of livelihoods, in which households and communities lack sufficient access to the key productive resources and opportunities they need to construct viable livelihoods. As a result, they become dependent on assistance, either from within the community – which might be less available now and in the future than in the past, given our evidence that destitution is experienced collectively as much as by individual households – or from outside organisations, including the government and NGOs. We therefore see destitution as both a state and a process, which needs to be analysed at both the household and community levels. Our framework also has a longer time-frame than conventional income-based concepts of poverty, since it encompasses both the causes and consequences of destitution – vulnerability processes as well as (unviable) livelihood outcomes. All these characteristics and components of our definition and conceptual framework appear to match well with local perceptions and experiences.

This conceptualisation of destitution also carries some important implications for policy. If destitution is primarily a consequence of assetlessness, then welfarist interventions in the form of food aid or food-for-work will not “solve” destitution – on the contrary, they merely maintain aid recipients in permanent dependence on transfers. A strategy for addressing destitution sustainably must involve social protection measures, but it must also include innovative ideas for restoring access to household assets, (re-) building community-level assets, and supporting or generating alternative livelihood options that are viable, not vulnerable. In short, addressing destitution means reversing the three elements of our definition: the destitute must be empowered to meet their *minimum subsistence needs*, their *access to key productive assets* must be enhanced, and their *dependence on transfers* must end.

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