(Do) (Can) (Should) universities have a role in local poverty alleviation?

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A shifting national agenda?

Sustained per capita income growth

- 4.5% since 2010
- a "growth acceleration" [Hausman et al. 2005].
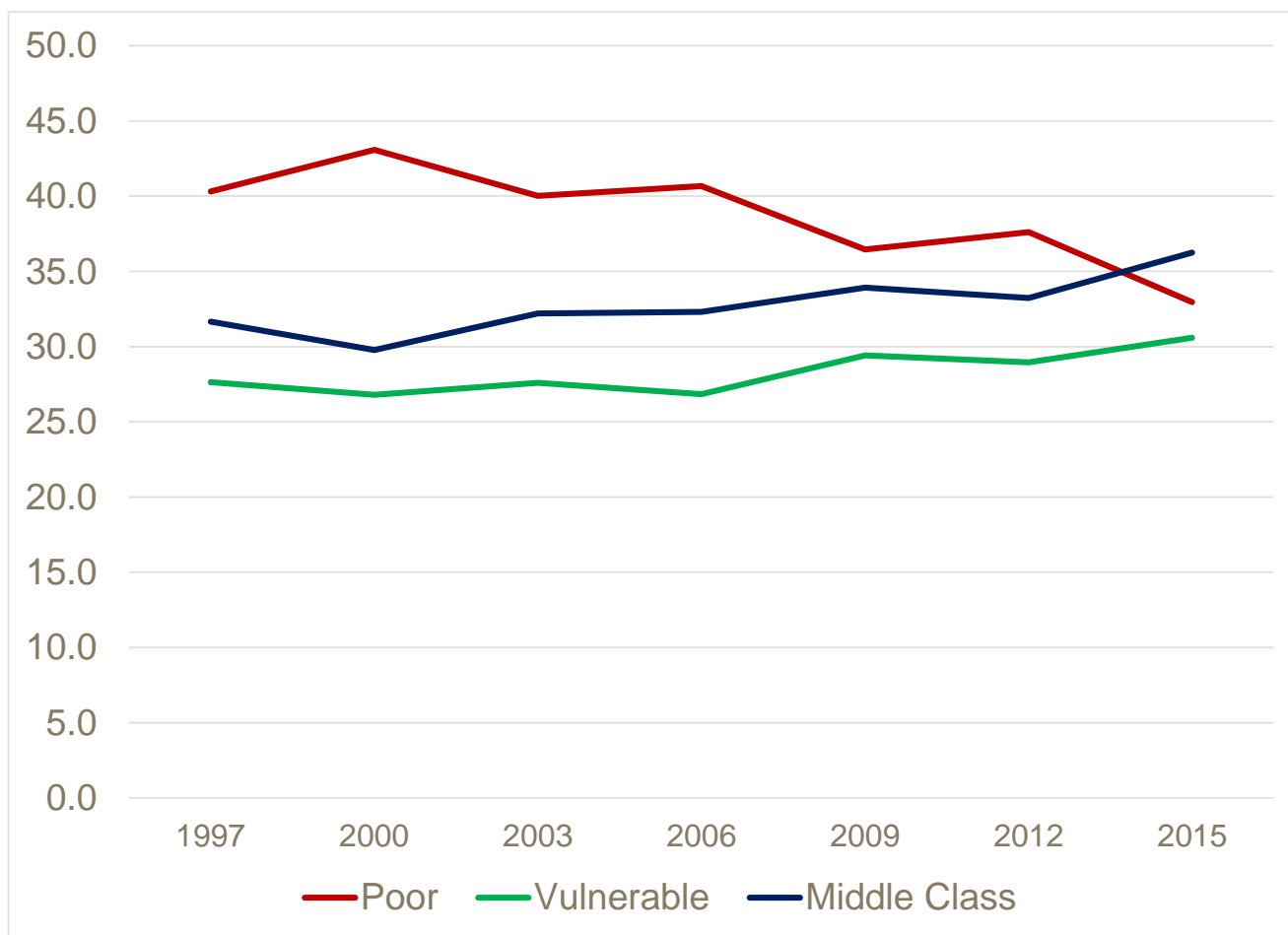
Ph graduation to upper middle-income (UMI) status by 2019-2020

- UMI per capita income: $3956–$12,235
- Ph was $3580 in 2016

Poor as a minority in society? A weaker constituency.

- PSA (2015) headcount incidence 21.6%
- WB criteria (2015): very poor 9.6%; poor 23.3%; vulnerable 30.6%; economically secure 30.8%; upper middle 5.4%

Declining share of the poor

A shifting national agenda?

Possible upshot: erosion of empathy and social solidarity

- middle-class apathy and self-absorption

- "populist" policy to increasingly favour upper and middle classes

- pro-poor agenda "falling between the cracks"?

- signs: toleration of EJKs vs. the poor; middle-class legislation (including free state college tuition, TRAIN, pensions, etc.)

Direction of HEIs

1. Difficulties in HEIs' traditional role and organisation

   - traditionally cosmopolitan HEI aspirations
   - low value ascribed to work with specific applications or purely local significance
   - compartmentalisation among disciplines hinders dealing with complex problems
   - self-contained social role and function leads to rationalisation against work in nontraditional activities

Complexity

There are no economic, sociological, or psychological problems, but just problems, and they are fixed and composite. In research, the only permissible demarcation is between relevant and irrelevant conditions.

G. Myrdal [1968] *Asian drama*

Direction of HEIs

2. Peculiar circumstances:

- pre-emption of time in standard pedagogy (work and career preparation) for most HEIs militates against experimentation and novelty

- added difficulties in budgets and enrollment for private HEIs (especially with free state college tuition)

- for higher level HEIs, push is towards leading-edge research (e.g. STEM) and higher quality (e.g. performance in league tables)

Overall Rank	University	Overall Rating	Academic Reputation
1	Massachusetts Inst of Technology	100	100
3	Harvard University	98.3	100
4	University of Cambridge	97.2	100
11	Princeton University	92.8	100
12	National University of Singapore	91.5	100
13	Nanyang University	91.4	91.6
15	Yale University	90.9	100
16	Cornell University	90.1	99.6
24	Tsinghua University	86	99
27	University of Hong Kong	85.4	98.9
28	U of California Berkeley	85.2	100
34	University of Tokyo	82.6	100
35	Seoul National University	82.1	72.9
39	Peking University	81.3	88.8
133	Universiti Malaya	57.1	55.7
252	Chulalongkorn University	40.6	68.9
270	Universiti Putra Malaysia	38.8	43.2
283	Mahidol University	37.6	45.8
288	Universiti Technologi Malaysia	37.4	n.a.
302	University Kebangsaan Malaysia	36.7	40
325	Universitas Indonesia	35	42.6
330	University Sains Malysia	34.6	40.3
374	University of the Philippines	31.5	42.5
501-550	Ateneo de Manila University	n.a.	30.4
701+	De La Salle University	n.a.	n.a.
701+	University of Santo Tomas	n.a.	n.a.

Source: QS Top Universities 2016/2017. Available from: https://www.topuniversities.com/university-rankings/world-university-rankings/2016

Current practice inadequate, as expected

- low level of research in HEIs generally: in terms of existing talent pool as well as time-priority allocation

- mostly fragmented, episodic efforts among individual faculty

- poverty alleviation research – but especially those local in scale – not an attractive field: a distraction from routine teaching or from mainstream research advancement

- currently kept alive by public funds and foreign-assistance; less forthcoming from private philanthropy (but for how long?)

Why it may be (right) (feasible) (helpful)

1. Humanitarian and social foundations of HEIs demand intervention and involvement in the face of human need.

2. Engagement can be an effective if novel pedagogical and research method (the latter, e.g., as action research)

3. Access to local conditions may be a unique source of data and experience.

4. May foster cross-disciplinary collaboration contributing to academic goals.

5. Can become vehicle for institutional partnerships (across HEIs, HEI-business, HEI-NGO, HEI-NG-LGU) expanding university network and influence.

Examples

1. Programme of randomised controlled trials (RCTs) applied to antipoverty interventions; led to the Poverty Action Lab at MIT formed by Bannerjee, Duflo, and Mullainathan.

2. Earth Institute at Columbia U: a multidisciplinary effort ("earth systems science"); research and degree-granting unit (MA, MS, MPA, and a PhD in sustainable development).

3. Sustainable Development Solutions Network: network of universities and research institutes collaborating on the SDGs

4. Some Ph examples: Human Development Network; UP Center for Integrative and Development Studies (EMIT C4C); Ateneo Institute of Sustainability; SDSN-Philippines.

What is needed?

Challenge is to integrate local poverty research into *mainstream* of academic life (teaching, research, extension) in HEIs.

1. *Affirmative action* for members of immediate community(admissions, scholarships, mentoring), which can also lead to research on equity and social mobility.

2. *Knowledge entrepreneurs* or research-leaders who see knowledge-generating potential of poverty problems – especially at the local level – and who can align these with mainstream academic goals.

What is needed?

3. *Familiarity and receptiveness to applying new approaches to poverty research*. Examples are RCT, data science, action research, cross-disciplinary approaches involving STEM, IT-supported pedagogies.

4. *Openness to networking and collaboration.* Working with business, CSOs (both philanthropic and mainstream), and LGUs can effectively mobilise finance, stimulate interest in research, disseminate it, and put implement it at scale.

5. *Specialised units/faculties* may need to be devoted to research and networking in this field. Spinoff organisations may also be formed to implement lessons of research.

END

We do, we can, we should.