

INCIDENCE OF POVERTY IN NEPAL FROM 1995/96 to 2022/23

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Abstract

Poverty is the absence of or deprivation of basic commodities and services. The fundamental amenities that the impoverished need to survive and lead regular lives—such as food, clothing, shelter, education, and health care—are denied to them. Poverty is a multifaceted issue that has its roots in social and cultural standards at the local level. It is defined as the denial of material, bodily, and social requirements. The inability to provide for basic necessities such as clothing, food, housing, basic medical care, education, and other forms of physical well-being is what is known as poverty. In Nepal, poverty is a pervasive condition. The patterns, inequalities, and variance of poverty in Nepal are presented in this article. According to this report, Nepal has been gradually but steadily lowering poverty for a considerable amount of time. Between 1995/96 and 2022/23 Nepal made measurable progress in reducing monetary poverty, but the pace and pattern varied across time, space, and by how poverty was measured. Using the four rounds of the Nepal Living Standards Survey (NLSS I–IV), the national headcount of consumption poverty fell from about 41.8% in 1995/96 to 30.9% in 2003/04, 25.2% in 2010/11, and 20.3% in 2022/23. These headline numbers mask important measurement changes, urban–rural differences, and interruptions caused by shocks (notably the 2015 earthquake and the COVID-19 era).

Keywords: Poverty, Deprivation, Incidence, Disparity, Poverty Reduction, Nepal

Introduction

Background

The concept of poverty varies among scholars due to its various facets and connections. Despite numerous definitions in the 1970s and 1980s, none are universally accepted, making it a complex and elusive task (World Bank, 1995). In the majority of emerging nations and regions of the world, poverty and inequality have been found to be structural and linked with imperialism and disasters. The pioneers of dependency school of thought on development (JBIC, 2003).

Poverty is a global issue with a strong link to Quality of Life. However, the World Bank (2004) questions whether money is the true measure of poverty and Quality of Life, as higher-

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income developing world populations still struggle with quality of life (World Bank, 2004). People are deemed poor if their daily income is less than \$1 or \$2 per head. The other indicator, known as Unsatisfied Basic Human Needs (BHN), measures poverty in a non-monetary way. In this aspect, people are unable to have access of basic needs such as housing, basic health services, nutrition, and education (World Bank, 2009).

Poverty is a violation of human dignity, characterized by denial of choices and opportunities, lack of basic capacity, insecurity, powerlessness, exclusion, vulnerability to violence, and living in marginal or fragile environments without access to clean water or sanitation (UNDP, 2018). Roy, Ray, and Haldar (2018) studied multidimensional poverty in West Bengal using multi-stage random sampling. They found that public infrastructure significantly influences MDP variations, and the study is expected to aid development planners in understanding the issue Roy, Ray and Haldar (2018).

Sen (1999) focused on human capability while defining the poverty. He emphasized that poverty is the lack of basic abilities to achieve well-being. In the meantime, Nikku and Azman (2014) gave more emphasis on social exclusion in poverty debate. Crossman (2019) gives sociological definition of poverty. According to him, poverty is a social state that is defined by the absence of essential resources needed for survival or to satisfy the minimal standards of living that are anticipated in the community where a person lives.

Thus, according to several definitions, poverty is the absence of the financial, social, and material resources a person needs to lead a healthy and fulfilling life. Depending on income level, several definitions of poverty may exist. Therefore, to put it simply, poverty is the inability to obtain clothing, food, and shelter. In a similar vein, it also encompasses insufficient or non-existent health care and education, which further distances the individual from the majority. This study aims to describe Nepal's poverty incidence from 1995–1996 until 2022–2023.

The methodologies used for poverty measurement in Nepal have developed significantly, moving from initial income-based approaches to the broadly used Cost of Basic Needs (CBN) consumption-based method and, more newly, the Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI). The changes have intended for better comparability and a more all-inclusive view of deprivation, but have also led to challenges in comparing historical poverty rates.

Key Methodological Changes

Newly Income Approach (pre-1990s): Initial poverty measurements, such as those in the late 1970s and 1980s, primarily used an income-based criterion. These early estimates were often not comparable due to varying methodologies and data sources (e.g., Household Budget Survey 1976/77 and Multi-purpose Household Budget Survey 1984/85).

Cost of Basic Needs (CBN) / Consumption Approach (1990s-present): The Central Bureau of Statistics (CBS) adopted the CBN method, based on the World Bank's Living Standards Measurement Survey (LSMS) methodology, starting with the first Nepal Living Standards Survey (NLSS) in 1995-96 (CBS, 2019).

This approach computes a poverty line based on the monetary value of a minimum basic needs basket. Following NLSS rounds (NLSS-II in 2003-04, NLSS-III in 2010-11, and NLSS-IV in

2022-23) have continued using this framework, allowing for better comparability over these specific periods. For the 2010/11 survey, the poverty line was reviewed to incorporate a new basic basket that reflects changes in lifestyle and increasing wants, helping it converge with the World Bank's international poverty line (then \$1.25/day PPP) (CBS, 2019).

Small Area Estimation (SAE): The CBN method usually offers estimates at the national or large regional levels. To produce poverty estimates for smaller administrative areas like districts and municipalities, Nepal has applied SAE, combining the detailed survey data from NLSS with the comprehensive coverage of the national population census (CBS, 2010, 2011).

Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI): Knowing that poverty is not solely about income or consumption, Nepal adopted the MPI, which considers deprivation across multiple dimensions: Health, Education, and Living Standards. This approach provides a more holistic view of poverty. The MPI uses indicators such as child mortality, nutrition, school attendance, drinking water, sanitation, and electricity access.

Reviews and Impact

Comparability Issues: A key result in various studies is that the initial poverty rates from the 1970s and 1980s were not comparable due to methodological differences, which stalled the assessment of long-term trends (Chhetry, 2004).

Revised Estimates: When reflective estimates were calculated using a consistent methodology (e.g., applying the 2010/11 NLSS methodology to earlier data), they often showed higher historical poverty rates than originally reported, suggesting that earlier methods might have undervalued poverty.

Inclusion of Non-Monetary Aspects: The move towards the Multidimensional Poverty Index has been widely reviewed as a significant step towards a rights-based, capability approach to development, moving beyond narrow "money-metric" measurements.

Challenges in MPI: Critics of the MPI methodological issues such as the somewhat arbitrary nature of deprivation cut-off marks and the potential loss of information when converting data into a binary.

Result And Discussion/Analysis

Discussion

This paper depends on the data published by CBS, NPC, UNDP, World Bank and other related studies. NLSS (Nepal Living Standard Survey) series of CBS provides four comparable survey rounds across the period:

1995/96: 41.76% of the population below the national poverty line (NLSS-I).

2003/04: 30.85% (NLSS-II).

2010/11: 25.16% (NLSS-III).

2022/23: 20.27% (NLSS-IV, using the 2022/23 national poverty line)

In order to quantify people's living standards objectively and ascertain the extent of poverty in the nation, the Nepal Living Standards Survey (NLSS) was first conducted in 1995–96. Demographics, consumption, income, housing, education, health, employment, credit, and remittances were just a few of the many household welfare-related areas that were examined in the study. The survey was the first of its kind to gauge Nepal's poverty's "extent and dimension." Decision-makers in government agencies, civil society groups, and international development partners found the findings to be helpful. In order to update the poverty measures, the NLSS-I, NLSS-II, NLSS-III, and NLSS-IV were implemented in 1995–1996; 2003–2004; 2010–11; and 2022–2023, respectively.

Since 1996, the survey has also been used to measure the impact of policies and programs on poverty. Other indicators of social well-being as well as to monitor and track improvements in living conditions. A solid foundation for tracking the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) throughout time has also been established by the survey data. Accurate, reliable, and timely data are the basis for monitoring the government's efforts and achievements towards fulfilling its development objectives. Thus, the fourth Nepal Living Standards Survey (NLSS-IV) was decided to be conducted by the Nepali government. As a result, from July 2022 to June 2023, the National Statistics Office (NSO), formerly known as the Central Bureau of Statistics, operated NLSS-IV. The World Bank provided technical assistance to support the implementation of the survey and the methodology for estimating poverty.

Results on the scope and characteristics of poverty in Nepal in 2022–2023 are presented in this article, along with the changes that have taken place since the last poverty profiles were created in 1995–1996 and 2003–2004. The 1995-96 Nepal Living Standards Survey (NLSS-I), (NLSS-II), AND (NLSS-III) were used to determine Nepal's poverty line using the cost-of-basic-needs (CBN) technique. Using region-specific pricing indices based on NLSS-I 1995-96, NLSS-II 2003-04, and NLSS-III, changes in the cost of living have been taken into account.

According to the World Bank's Poverty Assessment report, "Nepal: Poverty at the Turn of the Twenty-First Century," 42 percent of Nepalese lived in poverty between 1995 and 1996. The Nepalese economy did well in the eight years between 1995–1996 and 2003–2004, with real gross domestic product (GDP) expanding at a rate of about 5% annually (2.5 percent per capita annually). In the latter part of the 1990s, annual agricultural growth sped up to 3.7 percent, or roughly 1.5 percent annually per capita. Additionally, manufacturing (driven by exports), services, and particularly tourism all saw faster growth. Foreign remittances skyrocketed, and in FY03, they totalled over 54 billion NRS via official channels, or 12.4% of GDP. This significant remittance influx indicates that private consumption and household disposable income are increasing more quickly than the GDP growth statistics would imply.

These numbers show a long-term decline in the incidence of consumption poverty: overall, around 21–22 percentage points of the population moved above the national poverty line between 1995/96 and 2022/23 (when comparing survey-specific poverty lines). However, reading trends requires care because the official poverty line itself was revised in 2010 and again in 2022/23 (new baskets, recall periods, and price bases). The NLSS-IV report and World Bank methodological notes emphasize these changes and explain how comparisons were constructed.

Nepal's NPC (2020) plans to make it a middle-income country by 2030, with progress in poverty reduction from 25.16% to 21.6% (NPC, 2010). Nepal has successfully reduced poverty from 25.2 percent in 2011 to 21.6 percent in 2015, according to a UNDP (2015) report. However, these figures conceal a grim reality: there is still a great deal of inequality and imbalance between social classes and regions.

Incidence of Poverty in Nepal between 1995-96 and 2003-04

Trends in the prevalence of poverty in Nepal throughout the eight years between the CBS's Nepal Living Standards Surveys (NLSS-I and II) are estimated. According to headcount statistics, Nepal's poverty rate has significantly decreased between 1995–1996 and 2022–2023.

First, the main conclusion about how we are doing in terms of helping individuals escape poverty based on their spending and food choices. The percentage of the population living in poverty has steadily decreased from NLSS I (1995–1996) to NLSS II (2003–04), NLSS III (2010–11), and currently NLSS IV: 42%, 31%, 25%, and 20%, respectively. Naturally, there is nothing that compares to the significant improvement between NLSS I and NLSS II, when it was discovered that over 25% of the poor had risen beyond the national poverty line—and that too during a time when the Maoist insurgency was at its worst.

Table 1. Incident of Poverty from 1995-96 to 2022-23

Region Poverty Incidence	NLSS-I 1995-96	NLSS-II 2003-04	NLSS -III 2010-11	NLSS-IV 2022-23
Headcount rate (P_o)				
Nepal	41.76	30.85	25.16	20.27
Urban	21.55	9.55	15.46	18.34
Rural	43.27	34.62	27.43	24.34
Poverty gap (P_I) %				
Nepal	11.75	7.55	5.43	4.52
Urban	6.54	2.18	3.19	4.03
Rural	12.14	8.5	5.96	5.64
Squared Poverty gap(P_2)%				
Nepal	4.67	2.70	1.81	1.48
Urban	2.65	0.71	1.01	1.29
Rural	4.83	3.05	2.00	1.91

In Nepal, 31% of the population lived in poverty in 2003–04, up from 42% in 1995–96. As a result, during the period of eight years, Nepal's poverty rate decreased by almost 11 percentage points, or 26%, or 3.7 percent annually. In metropolitan areas, the prevalence of poverty more than

halved, falling from 22% to 10%, or 9.7% annually. The incidence of poverty in rural areas remained higher than in urban areas, despite a notable drop of one percentage point annually.

From the table-1, it is evident that Nepal's poverty rate has been declining for the past 20 years or more. In 1995–96, it was 41.8 percent; in 2017–18, it was 18.7 percent. During this time, the number of persons living below the poverty line dropped from 8.57 million to 5.44 million. Although there has been a roughly 50% decline in poverty over the past 20 years, poverty remains a major issue in the nation. The disparity in poverty by region is more noticeable.

Numerous studies indicate that in Nepal, rural poverty is more prevalent than urban poverty. Poverty gaps have not improved over time, despite a decline in the number of people living below the poverty line nationwide. In 1996, 21.6 percent of people lived in urban areas; this number dropped to 10 percent in 2004 before rising to 15.5% in 2011. Nonetheless, the percentage of rural residents living in poverty dropped from 43.5 percent in 1996 to 35 percent in 2004 and 27.4 percent in 2011.

According to NPC (2010), poverty rates were 35 percent in rural areas and 10 percent in urban areas. The rural poverty rate was 28.2 percent till 2009, whereas the urban poverty rate dropped to 8 percent. In contrast to the 42 percent national poverty incidence, urban poverty was only approximately 23 percent, and it was just 4 percent in the Kathmandu valley alone, according to the inaugural NLSS. According to the survey, poverty in the nation varies by region as well. According to CBS (1994), the poverty rate was 42% in the Terai region, 41% in the hill region, and 56% in the Himalayan region.

Measurement and comparability

Poverty lines changed. The national poverty line used in 1995/96 differs in real terms from the 2010/11 and 2022/23 lines (for example, the 2022/23 official line is NRs 72,908 per person per year in 2023 prices). Because of changes in the basket, recall period and spatial price adjustments, direct comparisons must state which poverty line is used. The NLSS-IV report gives both “within-line” comparisons and re-benchmarked comparisons to clarify trends.

If the 2010/11 welfare distribution is re-evaluated against the 2010 line adjusted to 2023 prices, the drop in poverty between 2010/11 and 2022/23 can look much larger (for example, NLSS-IV shows a fall to about 3.6% if using the old 2010/11 line adjusted forward).

Urban and rural poverty

While rural poverty in Nepal continues to decline, urban poverty is increasing. The percentage of urban residents living in slums is increasing countrywide, and urbanization is a national phenomenon. They lack access to basic sanitary facilities, clean water, and suitable housing. While urban poverty has been increasing as more people move to urban areas in search of better living conditions, rural poverty in Nepal has been steadily declining. According to the country's fourth Living Standard Survey, urban poverty increased from 15.46 percent in 2010–11 to 18.34 percent in 2022–23. Rural poverty, on the other hand, dropped from 27.43 percent in 2010–11 to 24.66 percent in 2022–15.

Prior to that, urban poverty had decreased from 21.55 percent in 1995–96, when the nation first conducted the Living Standard Survey, to 9.55 percent in 2003–04. In successive surveys, the

percentage of urban poor people has significantly increased. In the meantime, rural poverty has steadily decreased from its 1995–1996 peak of 43.27 percent. Those who live below the poverty line in the municipalities were used to calculate the percentage of urban poor in the most recent living standard survey.

Even though the poverty ratio is higher in rural municipalities, there should be more poor people living in municipalities than in rural ones. The urban population is growing as a result of people moving to cities in search of better employment, health, and educational possibilities. The following is a description of the Gini coefficients from various CBS surveys:

Table 2: Gini- Coefficients

Surveys	Nepal	Urban	Rural
NLSS-I (1995-96)	0.32	0.31	0.43
NLSS-II (2003-04)	0.41	0.35	0.44
NLSS-III (2010-11)	0.33	0.31	0.35
NLSS-IV (2022-23)	0.30	0.29	0.30

A higher Gini coefficient shows greater income inequality that correlated with a higher incidence of poverty. This means that a high Gini coefficient suggests a wider gap between the rich and the poor, with the benefits of economic growth not being shared equally, leading to a higher number of people living in poverty. Reducing the Gini coefficient has been shown to be an effective strategy for poverty reduction, with studies finding that even a 1% annual decrease could significantly lower the global poverty rate.

Between 1995–96 and 2003–04, Nepal experienced a sharp increase in inequality (from 0.32 to 0.41).

This period coincides with uneven economic growth, urban concentration of opportunities, and limited rural development during the early phase of liberalization and the Maoist conflict. From 2003–04 to 2010–11, inequality significantly declined (0.41 → 0.33), likely due to increased remittance inflows benefiting rural households and post-conflict reconstruction and poverty reduction programs. From 2010–11 to 2022–23, inequality continued to decline modestly (0.33 → 0.30), showing a trend toward more equal income distribution, possibly due to continued rural infrastructure expansion ,social protection programs and remittance-driven income stabilization.

The overall trend from 1995–96 to 2022–23 shows that income inequality in Nepal has declined after peaking in the early 2000s. The Gini coefficient dropped from 0.41 (2003–04) to 0.30 (2022–23). Urban-rural inequality narrowed sharply, indicating more balanced regional development. These patterns suggest Nepal's redistributive policies, remittance inflows, and rural development efforts have played a crucial role in reducing inequality.

Results

Key factor of changes

Multiple forces explain the long-run decline as well as episodic rises:

- Economic growth and remittances. Over the two decades Nepal experienced periods of robust remittance inflows and non-farm activity expansion which boosted household consumption and reduced poverty for many families.
- Migration (internal and international). Labor migration to India and overseas raised incomes for many households through remittances, a major driver of poverty reduction in rural areas.
- Public investments and basic services. Improvements in roads, access to markets, schooling, and financial services contributed to poverty reduction by raising productive opportunities and reducing living costs in remote areas. The NLSS-IV highlights the link between remoteness and higher poverty rates.
- Shocks and setbacks. The trajectory was not smooth. The 2015 Gorkha earthquake and the India-Nepal border disruptions (blockade) produced a short-term surge in poverty and reversed some gains; empirical work shows a jump in headcount rates in the mid-2010s. Similarly, the COVID-19 pandemic had an adverse impact on livelihoods and the poor, and required careful measurement in NLSS rounds and annual surveys.

Depth of poverty and inequality

Beyond the headcount, the NLSS series reports poverty gap and squared poverty gap (intensity and severity). These measures have fallen over time (for Nepal: poverty gap from ~11.8% in 1995/96 → 4.52% in 2022/23; squared gap also declined), indicating not only fewer poor people but generally smaller shortfalls from the poverty line among those remaining poor. Inequality (Gini) has shown fluctuations across rounds, and provincial/district heterogeneity remains large.

Regional and demographic patterns

Substantial geographic variation exists: poorer provinces, remote mountain districts, and households far from markets and services continue to have higher poverty incidence. The NLSS-IV gives district-level and small-area estimates to highlight these disparities. Vulnerable groups (landless or near-landless households, households dependent on subsistence agriculture, female-headed households in some contexts) register higher poverty incidence and deeper poverty gaps. Policy targeting remains important.

Policy implications

Sustain inclusive growth: Continued emphasis on productive job creation (non-farm rural employment, small enterprises, tourism, green sectors) and on leveraging remittances productively.

Targeted social protection: Expand and refine cash transfers, public works, school feeding and pension schemes—especially for remote districts and fragile households—to reduce depth and severity of poverty.

Infrastructure and service access: Better roads, markets, health and education reduce the chronic nature of poverty by lowering transaction costs and improving human capital.

Disaster resilience and shock-response: Strengthened disaster risk reduction and quick-response safety nets are critical to avoid backslicing aftershocks (earthquakes, blockades, pandemics). Evidence from the 2015–16 period shows large short-term reversals when shocks hit.

What to watch next (measurement & monitoring)

Poverty line revisions and methodological notes (including the World Bank's methodological note for NLSS-IV) matter for how trends are reported and interpreted; analysts should present both "survey-line" and re-benchmarked comparisons to be transparent.

Small-area estimates and disaggregated monitoring (by district, municipality, gender, and caste/ethnicity) will be crucial to target policies where remaining poverty is concentrated.

In Nepal, poverty is a pervasive and intricate issue for which there are no easy answers. The poor are the ones who are most impacted by poverty, which has a multifaceted nature. To assist the impoverished in escaping the poverty trap, the GON has been working to develop and execute policies aimed at reducing poverty. Nevertheless, the policies are poorly drafted and difficult to administer. As a result, the vast majority of the impoverished remain below the poverty line. The cultural capital of rural communities has not been able to be included in the various techniques and strategies used to reduce poverty. The process of formulating policies has yet to include the identification of cultural capital and mobilization. The monetary method is essentially the main focus of the poverty reduction strategy. As a result, Nepal has not made significant strides toward reducing poverty, yet poverty still exists there as a rural issue.

Conclusions

From 1995/96 to 2022/23 Nepal made important strides in reducing consumption poverty: the national headcount fell from roughly 42% → 20% across the four NLSS waves. That is a significant achievement. Yet large pockets of poverty remain—concentrated in rural and remote areas, and exposed to shocks—and measurement choices (updated poverty lines and survey methods) affect how progress is reported. Continued policy focus on jobs, services, social protection and resilience will determine whether the next decade converts these gains into durable poverty elimination for all Nepalese.

The pace of reducing poverty is slow, but people's quality of life has improved as well. Additionally, several markers of human growth have improved. Life expectancy, baby and maternal mortality rates, and adult literacy are just a few of the markers that have improved over time. However, poverty remains a widespread and complex issue in Nepal, making it one of the world's poorest nations. The fifteenth five-year plan is presently being implemented.

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