

Multidimensional Poverty Index

CASE STUDY 2014



“The only shelter from the rain is the imperfect protection offered by the bridge above.”

ARUNA, India

Alongside railroad tracks, in the shadow of enormous billboards advertising smart watches and other goods far beyond their income, Aruna and her family make their home beneath a bridge in Mumbai. Their clothes, mats, and all worldly good are stored in the open, and she must be constantly on watch to safeguard what little they own. The only shelter from the rain is the imperfect protection offered by the bridge above. At night, Aruna stays awake until the drunks who often congregate near the bridge leave – afraid that they will do her harm.

The only light they have comes from the streetlights, and the family must rely on a pay-and-use toilet for water and sanitation. The toilet opens at 6am and closes at 11–11:30pm. During the night when the toilet is shut, the men use the railway tracks as a toilet, but the women are forced to find a secluded gutter. The toilet attendant sells 10 litres of water for Rs.5 (\$0.08). Aruna's family also bathes at the public toilet at a cost of Rs.10/person. The total cost of bathing, using the toilet, and additional water is about Rs.30/day.

The 30-year-old mother of four makes her living making and selling flower garlands, for which she earns Rs.20–40 a day. Her husband can earn significantly more (Rs.250–300 a day) as a labourer pushing a handcart and at other odd jobs, but work is scarce and unpredictable. Often, he only works one or two days a week.



Each day, Aruna rises at 6 or 7am, and, if there is wood, she cooks some lentils and rice or a mix of the two (kh-ichdi). Everyone eats on those mornings. If there is no wood, her husband goes to work hungry and they buy some rice for Rs.15–20 to sustain them through the day. On days that her husband does work, he leaves for work around 7am. If he leaves late, he usually doesn't get work. If he doesn't get work he sits around, which Aruna says aggravates her. After eating, Aruna sees to the cleaning up and tells the children to study while she makes garlands.

At 10am all the children except the one-year-old baby go to a centre run by a private trust, where they get a hot meal. From there they go to school. Since bathing is expensive, the children usually bathe only every 2–3 days; as a result, they face ridicule at school because they do not bathe daily and appear dirty.

At noon, Aruna usually drinks a cup of tea, but the price of tea has increased of late, so she consumes less. Afternoons are spent making garlands. She lives in constant fear that officials from the municipality will appear and confiscate her few belongings. When the officials arrive, Aruna usually grabs what she can and runs. For this reason she doesn't rest, as many others do, during the afternoon.

The children return from school at 6pm and blow up balloons, which they sell at the seaside. Some days, Aruna accompanies the children, because the police harass them and chase them away. They return around 10pm. On those weekdays, the children can earn Rs.50–60, while at the weekends they work longer hours and can earn Rs.100–150. When the children arrive home,

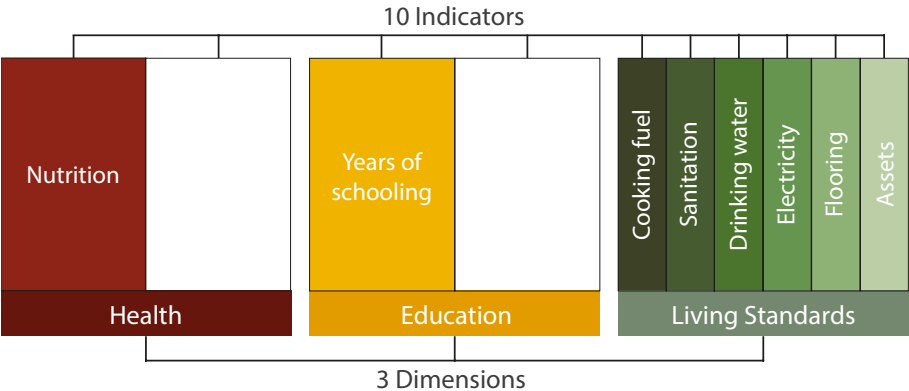
they may eat something, depending on the day's finances, but some days they go to sleep without eating.

When they do eat, their choices are limited. They can no longer eat pearl millet (bajra) chapattis regularly, because its cost has risen to Rs.25/kg. Occasionally, they enjoy onions, tomatoes, or potatoes. Although Aruna has a ration card, she has yet to receive any entitlements. Her sister recently gave birth and, as a result, has been receiving 15kgs rice/month. Aruna sometimes asks her for a few kilograms.

Aruna and her family used to live in a tin hut owned by her father. While that shack also lacked electricity, and sanitation was worse (no pay toilets nearby, no toilet at all), it did have a roof and Aruna had access to her father's utensils. The shack was demolished when her father was allotted a home in the suburbs. Some of her neighbours have also been provided with housing, but without documents, Aruna was unable to navigate the bureaucracy in order to be allotted a house.

The constant vulnerability and decline in her circumstances have placed great strain on Aruna. She fights with her husband more often, and tells him they cannot live if he does not find work. Aruna admits that sometimes she grows so frustrated with her situation that she thinks about buying poison and ending her and her children's lives. When asked what would need to happen in order for life to improve, she responds that her family needs a house or room to live in, a reliable source of income, and a good education for the children.

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Aruna's deprivation chart. The coloured boxes show the deprivations that her household faces across the MPI.