Foreword

John Veit-Wilson

Budget studies have a long history. Over the centuries, some employers, policy makers and social reformers have had interests in seeing that wage rates and social security systems were sufficient to prevent political disorder and physical and social deprivation among working people. In the UK, first the fluctuating cost of grain for bread and later of a few other basic essentials were identified as key criteria for contemporary class judgements of 'how much was enough' for the wages of low-paid workers and their families – those most at risk of suffering the consequences of deprivation or rebelling against them. The non-poor classes identified the social evils of poverty which ought to be philanthropically ameliorated if not actually politically abolished, and that required some criteria of minimum necessities. So when people started to ask 'how much is enough', the earliest budget studies were developed as systematic means of listing the components of minimum sufficiency. What this book very helpfully does is to show the current state of budget studies research around the world and its relevance to the general question: if the objective is to combat or prevent poverty, how much is enough personal disposable income?

Posing the issue in historical perspective shows how important this book is today in showing the disparate and often conflicting objectives for which budget studies are nowadays carried out. As a member of Peter Townsend and Brian Abel-Smith's team carrying out the first national survey of poverty in the UK in the 1960s, I'm delighted to be asked to introduce this volume. At that time we had not thought through what has since emerged as the implication of all studies of poverty – that since poverty is a dyadic relationship, we should have paid more attention to mapping what not-poverty is: the adequacy of personal resources for minimally decent inclusion in society. Because we had not sufficiently distinguished adequacy standards from poverty, the indicators we drew from pilot studies of what a normal inclusive life might or ought to include (such as being able to choose a cooked breakfast) were wrongly treated by some readers as our prescribed minimum necessities for poor people. We were counting people who seriously lacked resources for social inclusion, unlike those composing budgets in the earlier post-Seebohm Rowntree period who earnestly

sought the lowest family incomes on which minimum dietary necessities could be obtained. By contrast, others such as Sir John Boyd Orr and Dr Barnet Woolf argued that research should focus on the level of resources at which households actually achieved optimum dietary intakes: the inclusive adequacy standard.[1]

This dichotomy in approaches in the first half of the 20th century continues and is illustrated in these reports on budget studies. Some focus on empirical studies of what national populations as a whole report on 'having what you need in order to have the opportunities and choices necessary to participate in society'[2]: that is the Minimum Income Standard approach to an acceptable decent minimum adequacy level for all, not poverty. Others report on normative studies of the minimum personal incomes needed for some other objective such as delineating poverty. This variety of objectives includes guidance for national social security systems, pressured and fluctuating as they often are by a country's political considerations, but it also addresses researchers' lasting cross-national interests, including reference budgets to allow some kinds of comparative poverty statistics to be calculated on agreed normative standards. These are household or family budgets taking the nation's surrounding world as a given, so they often have to disregard wider questions of context such as local housing costs and other collectively provided resources which may vary across nations and regions.

The overarching question of all budget studies remains: how much is enough? The variety of answers in these reports helps us to understand the range of prior assumptions on which budget studies may be based. The assumptions and values which research teams hold about who is describing how much is enough for whom, and what methods are appropriate in those contexts, are often implicit, and unvoiced because the epistemology of each study nationally undertaken may have been taken for granted in its own context and treated as unproblematic, not needing to be explained or justified. While it is arguably not the role of each research report to write its own theoretical essay on its choices of objectives and methods by which to achieve them, the book's value also lies in its juxtaposition of reports without obscuring differences in the broader frames within which to examine the findings. Here each team explains its own rationale without classificatory regimentation implied by editorial decisions. Readers passing from one report to another are thus repeatedly encouraged to think about the applicability of the variety of disparate approaches used in budget studies nowadays, and so cannot assume they all share the same epistemology and objectives because they may use similar basic budget methods.

The early 'top-down' budget researchers never faced the question of who is defining necessities for whom, and who has the privilege and expertise to identify, act and respond with budget plans and policies. Today other contrasting perspectives and methods also make contributions to our better understanding of social inclusion, adequacy and deprivation, such as qualitative accounts of life in poverty and the quantitative statistical data on income lacks and resource inequalities, and they also allow for comparison within and between countries. In the pursuit of better-informed policies to combat and prevent poverty, the range of budget studies in this book make a notable theoretical and practical contribution both to the evaluative criteria and substantive data which are essential.

Notes

[1] Minimum dietary intake: any further reduction leads to deficiency symptoms; optimum intake: no further increase improves health.

[2] Bradshaw, J., Middleton, S., Davis, A., Oldfield, N., Smith, N., Cosworth, L. and Williams, J. (2008) *A Minimum Income Standard for Britain: What People Think*, York: JRF.