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ORIGINAL RESEARCH

The Work Dimension in Multidimensional Poverty Measurement

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Abstract

We propose a conceptual and applicable framework for incorporating a work-related dimension—specifically poor-quality employment—into internationally comparable Multidimensional Poverty Indices (MPIs). Building on the capability approach, we argue that employment must be understood not solely as a source of income, but as a vital domain through which individuals achieve well-being, exercise agency, and access social rights. Despite this, poor-quality employment remains largely unaccounted for in global poverty measures. Through a critical review of the job quality literature and international measurement efforts, we identify five core domains of work-related deprivation: access to employment, monetary compensation, contractual security, employment stability, and working conditions. We assess their conceptual validity, data availability, and policy relevance, and outline criteria for selecting indicators within each domain. We also highlight methodological challenges—such as data harmonization, deprivation thresholds, and normative variability across contexts—and offer a structured questionnaire proposal for integration into standard household and labour force surveys. We argue that embedding a poor-quality employment dimension into MPIs would enable more accurate identification of the working poor and strengthen the capacity of poverty measures to inform policies aligned with Sustainable Development Goal 8, advancing a more inclusive and human-centered understanding of poverty.

Keywords Multidimensional poverty · Capability approach · Poor-quality employment · Job quality indicators · Labour market deprivation

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1 Introduction

Measuring multidimensional poverty is essential for capturing the complex, interrelated deprivations that individuals and households experience, which are often overlooked by traditional income-based metrics. The Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI), developed by the Oxford Poverty and Human Development Initiative (OPHI) and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), offers a comprehensive framework that assesses poverty across various dimensions, including health, education, and living standards. This approach enables policymakers to identify not only who is poor but also the specific areas where interventions are needed, facilitating more targeted and effective poverty alleviation strategies (Alkire & Santos, 2014). It is now well-accepted in academic and policymaking spheres that by moving beyond income alone, multidimensional measures provide a more nuanced understanding of poverty, reflecting the lived experiences of those affected and informing policies that address the root causes of deprivation.

This paper argues that incorporating an employment-related dimension into multidimensional poverty measures is particularly crucial, as the opportunity to participate in the labour market and the quality of this employment significantly influences individuals' well-being and their ability to escape poverty in all its forms. Employment is not merely a source of income; it also affects access to social insurance, health benefits, access to vocational training and skills development, as well as other rights, which constitute both resources and valued functionings to a worker (Sehnbruch 2008; Stephens 2023b). In addition, employment is of intrinsic value to individuals in that it provides personal development opportunities, the ability to exercise agency and autonomy, participate in a community, make a meaningful contribution to society, among many other valuable functionings and capabilities (Green, 2026; Sen, 2013). As a result, it also provides opportunities for self-realization, creative expression, and social recognition (Nussbaum, 2011).

Poor-quality employment, often characterized by employment conditions such as job instability, a lack of social protection, too many or too few working hours, too much or too little flexibility in terms of working arrangements and sometimes also exposure to mental or physical health risks, can perpetuate poverty even among the employed (Sehnbruch et al., 2020; González et al., 2021). In fact, workers can get "stuck" in a poor quality employment trap that then also perpetuates poverty (Sehnbruch et al. 2025b). Importantly, this literature has shown that even formal jobs in emerging economies can be of poor quality (Apablaza et al., 2024), which means that the traditional distinction between formal and informal work that frequently informs policymakers in these countries is no longer useful (Sehnbruch et al., 2024).

Recognizing this, some national MPIs –measures tailored to national-specific contexts— have consistently included work-related indicators, such as job security, working conditions, and access to labour rights, aligning with Sustainable Development Goal 8, which promotes "Decent Work for All" (see e.g. Nogales, 2024). However, challenges remain in standardizing these indicators across countries due to variations in data availability on labour markets. Addressing these challenges is vital for developing globally comparable measures that

accurately reflect the multifaceted nature of poverty and inform policies aimed at improving employment conditions worldwide.

This paper makes a specific and novel contribution to the multidimensional poverty measurement literature. We propose an employment dimension designed for integration into internationally comparable Multidimensional Poverty Indices (MPIs) using the Alkire-Foster (AF) methodology. Unlike existing job quality frameworks our framework is explicitly designed as one dimension within a multidimensional poverty measure, to sit alongside existing dimensions such as health, education, and living standards. This requires distinct methodological features: (1) poverty-calibrated deprivation thresholds that identify minimum acceptable standards rather than aspirational quality levels; (2) AF-compatible indicator structure with clear binary or categorical deprivations suitable for counting-based aggregation; (3) parsimonious indicator selection limited to 3–5 core indicators feasible in standard household surveys (DHS, MICS, LSMS) used for international MPI construction; (4) explicit guidance on weights and poverty cut-offs (k) for aggregation with other MPI dimensions; and (5) attention to potential redundancy with existing MPI indicators. Our framework is thus not a standalone measure of employment quality, but a poverty-focused employment dimension designed for methodological integration into existing global and national MPI architectures.

The global MPI (Alkire et al., 2022) relies primarily on DHS and MICS for data collection. These surveys currently include limited information regarding employment, measuring mainly health, education, and living standards. Four obstacles have impeded the inclusion of a employment dimension: (1) cross-country threshold heterogeneity; (2) the inadequacy of the formal/informal binary; (3) limited employment data in standard household surveys (DHS, MICS); and (4) potential double-counting with existing dimensions. Our framework addresses these through poverty-calibrated thresholds with fallbacks, multidimensional indicators beyond formality, a parsimonious indicator set feasible in existing surveys, and redundancy protocols.

Indeed, challenges to arrive at an internationally comparable measure of multidimensional poverty that includes a work-related dimension are both theoretical and empirical in nature.

First, conceptually. The terms work, employment and job tend to be used interchangeably, but they actually have different meanings. Work comprises any activity performed to produce goods or provide services for use by others or for own use, including domestic work. Employment describes the broader condition of being engaged in productive activity (which could be formal or informal), while a job is a specific set of tasks and responsibilities that can either occur within an organisation or has finite connotations ("I'm on a job this week"). Although the literature often uses these terms interchangeably, it is important to bear these distinctions in mind. Much of the literature on the quality of employment (QoE) uses the term "job quality" because it developed in a context of advanced economies where people generally have jobs rather than, for example, engaging in informal activities. When referring to a global context, however, it is preferable to use the term employment rather than a job, and to define that this refers to a remunerated activity, regardless of how this remuneration occurs.[1]

[1] As this paper cannot hope to address all aspects of work, we have chosen to focus on remunerated employment in the labour market. We are conscious that non-remunerated work, especially domestic and care work, should be included in any comprehensive analysis of the labour market, as should child and slave labour.

Theoretically, the notion of QoE has attracted increasing attention from policymakers in both developed and developing countries. There is a wide agreement around the necessity to develop a measure which can capture the development of a labour market beyond merely considering the quantity of jobs it generates. The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) put forward by the UN thus include "Decent Work for all" as an objective, but do not specify how progress towards this goal should be measured (SDG 8, UN, 2016). In fact, although the academic and institutional literature has arrived at a general consensus on what the term QoE means, less consensus exists on how to measure it (Sehnbruch et al., 2015).

It is a well-known fact that economic growth alone does not necessarily improve employment conditions (Apablaza et al., 2024), so GDP growth will not do as a good proxy variable for progress towards SDG 8. Contentious views regarding the necessary variables that should be included in such a definition as well as differences over what constitutes minimum standards of QoE have produced a significant degree of conceptual dispersion and a concomitant lack of reliable measures (Burchell et al., 2014; Piasna et al., 2019; Stephens, 2024). Furthermore, the absence of a coherent theoretical framework for understanding and measuring the QoE has been a major drawback for defining useful public policy approaches to the subject.

Moreover, data scarcity and deficiencies pose additional challenges towards developing an internationally comparable measure of QoE (Hovhannisyan et al., 2022). While most national surveys include basic employment questions — such as whether individuals are currently engaged in any form of work — they often lack harmonised and detailed information on critical dimensions of job quality. These include contract types, social security coverage, working hours, and workplace conditions, making it difficult to construct multidimensional indicators that accurately reflect workers' experiences.[2] In addition, the prevalence of informal employment in these regions further complicates data collection, as informal workers are frequently excluded from official statistics or underrepresented in surveys. Even when data are available, variations in survey design, question phrasing, and data collection methodologies across countries impede straightforward cross-national comparisons and the development of a unified empirical measurement framework. In a recent paper which measures poor-quality employment in Latin America with UN data, only four variables related to the QoE (earnings, employment contract, pension contributions and hours worked) could be included as they were the only comparable variables in the region (Apablaza et al., 2024). These challenges underscore the need for enhanced data collection efforts, including the standardization of questions in labour force surveys and the incorporation of variables on employment conditions. Without this, measuring progress towards SDG 8 will not be possible, and the issue of the QoE will not figure prominently enough on the agenda of policymakers. Similarly, international institutions will find it difficult to promote and measure progress on decent work globally.

This paper aims to build a conceptual bridge between the job quality literature and the multidimensional poverty literature. This implies a shift from measuring wellbeing to identifying deprivation. Job quality frameworks assess employment along a continuum using relative or aspirational standards, whereas multidimensional poverty requires binary thresholds that signal the absence of minimum acceptable conditions for a decent life. Our paper

[2] An exception to this rule are European countries, where the European Working Conditions Survey (EWCS) gathers comprehensive data on working conditions across the EU and beyond. However, the survey is only undertaken every 5 years and suffers from an extremely small sample size (Sehnbruch et al., 2026).

offers a detailed discussion about ways to overcome theoretical and empirical challenges, and inch forward in the construction of an internationally comparable measure of multidimensional poverty that includes a dimension on employment. Theoretically, our reflection adopts the capability approach as its framework (Sehnbruch 2008; Sehnbruch et al. 2020; Soffia et al. 2023; Stephens 2023b; Green 2026). Empirically, by systematically reviewing, synthesizing, and classifying existing labour-related indicators, most relevant indicators for assessing poverty using available data are identified. In doing so, it not only highlights areas of conceptual overlap and divergence, but also offers a framework through which labour market indicators can be meaningfully integrated into multidimensional poverty analysis grounded in the capability approach.

2 Theoretical Foundations for Measuring the QoE

It is now well established in the academic literature that employment constitutes far more than a mere source of income (Muñoz De Bustillo et al., 2011). Employment is a fundamental dimension of human agency and dignity, shaping individuals' capabilities to lead lives they value (Robeyns, 2005; Sen, 1999). As income-based measures capture only the monetary rewards of labour, an exclusive focus on earnings obscures the complex ways in which job quality is intertwined with personal and household well-being. A worker may draw a wage above the poverty line yet remain trapped in precarious work—characterized by temporary contracts, unpredictable hours, unsafe environments, or exclusion from social protection—thus perpetuating vulnerability rather than alleviating it (Piasna et al., 2019; Standing, 2011). In this sense, the QoE operates both instrumentally—by enabling access to goods and services—and intrinsically—by affording meaningful social participation and psychological security, rendering it absolutely indispensable for a multidimensional understanding of poverty (Stephens 2023b; Green 2026; Sehnbruch et al. 2026).

The academic debate has long revolved around which aspects of work most critically interrelate with multidimensional poverty outcomes. Early constructs of job quality, such as Jencks et al.'s (1998) 'index of job desirability' and Bescond et al.'s (2003) Seven Indicators of Decent Work, laid a foundation for identifying dimensions ranging from earnings adequacy to occupational safety. Subsequent efforts by Olsthoorn (2014) in the Netherlands and Green and Mostafa (2012) using the European Working Conditions Survey refined these dimensions, emphasizing contract stability, ergonomic risks, psychosocial stressors, and avenues for worker voice. Debate persists, however, over the relative weight of employment status versus qualitative conditions: should the mere presence of work be privileged over the security and social protections it entails? How should informality be treated, recognising that it is ubiquitous in practically all developing economies but also that it has a dual nature as both access to livelihood and embodiment of regulatory exclusion (Chen, 2012; ILO, 2023). These tensions underscore the challenge of constructing poverty metrics that can simultaneously capture discrete dimensions while remaining analytically coherent and policy-relevant.

International normative frameworks offer compelling, albeit imperfect anchors for translating these theoretical insights into measurement tools. The ILO's Decent Work Agenda, launched in 1999, posits four strategic pillars: employment promotion, rights at work, social protection, and social dialogue. These are arguably basic pillars, but political compromises

among the ILO's tripartite constituents have impeded the crystallization of a succinct composite indicator (Ghai, 2003; ILO, 2008). Likewise, Sustainable Development Goal 8 articulates the aspiration of "full and productive employment and decent work for all," yet its targets and indicators (e.g., 8.5 on full employment and 8.8 on labour rights) do not come together into a single, operational metric capable of guiding national policy (UN ECOSOC, 2017). The EU has faced analogous difficulties with its Job Quality Index, which synthesizes data on earnings, job security, and working conditions across member states but refrains from aggregating these into a unified score, in part to respect diverse labour market traditions (Eurofound, 2012; Leschke & Watt, 2014; Piasna et al., 2019).

Against this backdrop, recent empirical advances point both to promise and constraint in the Global South. The IDB's 2017 synthetic measure of QoE in Latin America represents a landmark effort to meld employment participation rates with formality and living-wage attainment into a single composite indicator (Inter-American Development Bank (IADB), 2017). By linking quantity and quality, the IDB's measure has succeeded in elevating policy attention to "the working poor" in regional debates. Yet, its reliance on macro-level aggregates obscures heterogeneity within-countries, for example, by geographical regions, gender, economic sector, social class or other population subgroups. And its lack of direct measures of working conditions and labour rights limits its capacity to diagnose the root causes of deprivation that the job quality literature highlights (Muñoz De Bustillo et al., 2011; Warhurst et al., 2022).

To navigate these theoretical and empirical constraints, a parsimonious yet principled approach to indicator selection is imperative. Anchored in the capability approach (Sen, 1992; Robeyns, 2017) and the methodological rigor of the Multidimensional Poverty Index (Alkire & Foster, 2011; Alkire et al., 2015), indicators should be chosen for their intrinsic and instrumental value, ensuring that each reflects a functioning essential to human well-being. As a valuable starting point, harmonized definitions drawing on ILO conventions such as C100 (equal remuneration) and C155 (occupational safety) promote cross-country comparability while allowing for contextual calibration (UNECE, 2015). Importantly, metrics must remain interpretable and actionable. For instance, a set of three to six dimensions focused on employment security, earnings adequacy, working conditions, labour rights, and informality may provide sufficient breadth without overwhelming policymakers. Finally, alignment with internationally recognized rights and standards ensures that the selected indicators embody normative commitments to social justice, bridging the gap between measurement and the aspirational goals of decent work. By embedding these principles within global poverty estimation frameworks, researchers and practitioners can more effectively illuminate, and hopefully inch forward towards ending the multidimensional deprivations that underlie working poverty.

3 Review of Potential Work-Related Indicators

3.1 Indicators of Job Quality

The concept of employment, job, or work quality has been extensively examined across both academic scholarship and policy discourse. Over the past two decades, various inter-

national organisations and institutions have attempted to operationalise this concept through the development of multidimensional frameworks and indicator-based measures.

Table 1 presents a synthesis of some well-known institutional initiatives in this domain. It highlights the diversity of institutional actors involved — including the European Union, ILO, OECD, World Bank, and CEDEFOP — as well as the variation in the number of dimensions and indicators employed. This diversity not only demonstrates the growing recognition of the importance of job quality but also underscores the conceptual and methodological challenges associated with defining and measuring it in a consistent and coherent way. The proliferation of frameworks reflects both the richness of the debate and the ongoing difficulty of arriving at a universally accepted conceptual foundation for assessing the QoE. An important development in recent job quality frameworks has been the incorporation of indicators that capture the evolving nature of work, especially those that may affect workers' vulnerability to poor-quality employment. The European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training (CEDEFOP) offers an example through its Skills Intelligence framework, which includes six dimensions: (1) Digitalization and Technology, (2) Employment trends, (3) Skills and Learning, (4) Future jobs, (5) Workplace trends, and (6) Skills in online job advertisements (CEDEFOP, n.d.). However, despite its potential future relevance, we prioritise indicators that capture current deprivations in employment quality across a wider set of countries.

In the academic literature, the number and variety of indicators used to capture different aspects of employment are even more extensive, often reflecting different disciplines and theoretical frameworks (Burchell et al., 2014; Green, 2026). Technological change is increasingly recognised as a source of employment insecurity, distinct from traditional job loss linked to economic cycles or firm-level shocks. Automation may render entire occu-

Table 1 Selected institutional measures of job quality

Institution	Name/ Year of measure	Dimensions	Number of Indicators
CEPAL	Index of Poor-quality employment	3	4
EU	Laeken Indicators of job quality (2001)	10	24
Business Europe	Indicators of job quality (2001)		9
ETUI	Job quality index (periodical)	6	17
EMCO	Quality of work indicators (2010)	4	55
Eurofound	Job Quality Index (2012)		12
CEDEFOP	Skills Intelligence Indicators (Periodical)	6	43
ILO	Decent Work (2012)	4	60/71
IDB	Better Jobs Index (periodical)	2	4
UNECE	Job quality framework 2014	7	72
OECD	Job Quality Framework 2014/5	3	12
World Bank	Global Job Quality (2022)	4	25

Sources: Apablaza et al., 2024; Eurofound, 2012; Hovhannisyan et al., 2022; Inter-American Development Bank (IADB), 2017; OECD, 2013; Piasna, 2023; UNECE, 2015

pations or skill sets obsolete rather than displacing individual jobs. Despite its relevance, incorporating automation risk as a core indicator in an internationally comparable MPI is problematic. Automation exposure varies widely across countries due to differences in technology adoption, labour costs, regulation, and industrial structure; it also requires detailed task-level data rarely available in standard surveys, and its timing remains highly uncertain. For these reasons, while acknowledging its importance, we do not include automation risk in our parsimonious MPI framework.

Despite this diversity, a cluster analysis of terminology used identifies five core subdimensions that seem to capture the indicators most frequently used by the job quality literature: Economic Security, Dignified Working Conditions, Skills and Self-realization, Autonomy and Voice, and Work-Life Balance.

Following previous literature, this structure allows the inclusion of five key aspects that have been extensively explored in the literature on quality of life, employment, and the Capability Approach (Whoqol Group., 1998, Walker & Unterhalter, 2007, UNECE, 2015, OECD, 2018 and Hobson, 2013). The material dimension relates to economic security and the capacity to access and maintain the resources necessary for a dignified life. The physical and emotional dimension includes dignified working conditions that affect health, safety, and psychological well-being. The cognitive and vocational dimension highlights opportunities for learning, skill development, and personal fulfilment through meaningful work. The relational and political dimension refers to the ability to exercise autonomy, experience dignity, and participate in decision-making processes in the workplace. Finally, the temporal and social dimension addresses the compatibility between work and other domains of life, such as care, rest, and social relationships, reflecting the importance of work-life balance and social integration.

These dimensions comprise not only the material conditions of employment but also its intrinsic value, including procedural and relational aspects, voice and autonomy, respect, and the meaningfulness of work. More fundamentally, this structure reflects the extent to which employment contributes to individuals' substantive freedoms and opportunities to achieve valued functionings.

Figure 1 maps five subdimensions drawn from the job-quality literature, but integration into an MPI requires parsimony and a clear focus on poverty-relevant deprivations. Accordingly, these subdimensions are consolidated into five operational domains: access to employment and monetary compensation, which jointly capture economic security through employment and earnings; security and stability, which reflect economic security and autonomy via legal protection and job tenure; and working conditions, which capture dignified work and, selectively, autonomy and work–life balance through thresholds such as exces-

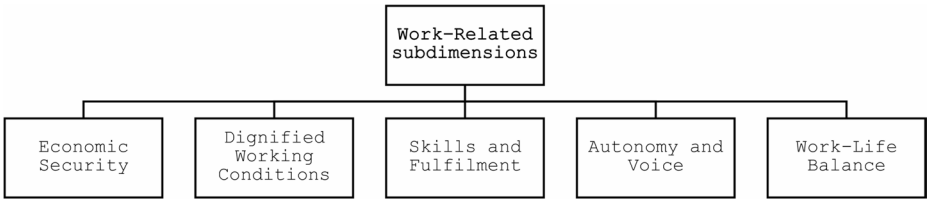

Fig. 1 Core subdimensions of employment conditions

sive hours. Other aspects, such as skills utilisation and self-realisation, are excluded because they largely overlap with the education dimension and require detailed occupational data not available in standard household surveys, while autonomy and work–life balance are incorporated only where they signal deprivation. This approach prioritises dimensions that are directly relevant to poverty and can be consistently measured with existing data sources.

Economic security includes probably the most frequently used indicators cited in the literature on measuring job quality (see Ralph & Arora, 2024 and Pereira et al., 2019). The core of this sub-dimension includes (1) wages and employment status of the worker; (2) whether their job is permanent or not; (2) access to social security provisions to insure against job losses, disability or old age; and (3) access to sufficient and stable income to meet an individual's and their family's basic needs. However, this sub-dimension could be extended to predictability of earnings, tenure, multiple job holding, and the ability to save or cope with emergencies. In addition, the risk of involuntary job loss is a central and dynamic component of economic security. Traditionally linked to downturns, firm closures, or contract non-renewal, it is increasingly shaped by technological change through automation and artificial intelligence (Acemoglu & Restrepo, 2020; Hötte et al., 2023). Our framework therefore, focuses on conventional job loss risks, which are more readily measured using standard surveys and support cross-country comparability. Nonetheless, we recognise that automation risk should be incorporated into future employment quality assessments as measurement approaches become more robust and internationally harmonised.

Dignified working conditions reflect the physical, psychological, and social environments in which work takes place that are essential to safeguarding well-being and protecting fundamental human rights. This sub-dimension includes workplace safety, reasonable working hours, fair treatment, the absence of harassment or discrimination, and access to basic facilities. While the wage differentials literature partially captures this aspect, pay alone cannot compensate for hazardous, exploitative, or disrespectful conditions (Muñoz De Bustillo et al., 2011; Sehnbruch et al., 2026; Green, 2026). We distinguish between two types of psychological harm in the workplace. Harassment and violence in the workplace involve explicit and deliberate actions intended to cause harm, intimidation, or distress to a specific individual or group (ILO, 2019). In contrast, work-related stress refers to a worker's physical and psychological response to demands, pressures, and expectations that they perceive as exceeding their ability to cope. Both forms of psychological harm have serious consequences for worker well-being and constitute important indicators of poor working conditions. However, their distinct nature requires separate measurement and targeted interventions.

The subdimension of skills and personal fulfilment assesses whether work contributes to expanding individuals' capabilities and human capital. This includes providing opportunities of self-actualization, learning, the use of existing skills, and the acquisition of new ones. On this topic, Sen's arguments regarding the purpose of human capital development as they relate to education can equally be applied to employment (Sen, 1997).

Autonomy and voice focus on whether work arrangements support individual agency and fair power relations in the workplace. The subdimension captures the degree of control workers have over their tasks and schedules, their ability to express concerns, participate in decision-making, and engage in collective bargaining. Jobs that limit autonomy or worker voice diminish personal agency and undermine well-being, even if other material conditions are met (Stephens 2023b, 2024).

Finally, work-life balance assesses whether employment supports not only economic needs but also a sustainable quality of life. This subdimension captures how well work integrates with family responsibilities, personal life, and leisure. Flexible work arrangements, reasonable working hours, and the ability to disconnect from work are vital in enabling individuals to achieve balance and sustain valued relationships and activities outside of employment. When jobs are inflexible or excessively demanding, they constrain individuals' capabilities in other life domains (Green, 2026; Sehnbruch et al., 2026).

In previous literature, the selection of specific indicators has been defined by the objectives of each measure, the conceptual framework, and the level of analysis (Piasna et al., 2017). However, in practice, indicator choices are also often constrained by the availability, quality, and comparability of data across contexts and populations (Sehnbruch, 2008; Sehnbruch et al., 2020, 2026).

Table 1, in the annexes, posits a classification of indicators commonly used in the study of job quality, organised according to the evaluative categories in the capability framework: resources, capabilities, functionings, and utility. The indicators included are relevant in each subdimension and are applicable at both the individual and household levels.

3.2 Indicators of Poor-Quality Employment

However, there are both theoretical and empirical limitations to incorporating the full set of employment-related indicators into a multidimensional poverty measure. While the literature offers several potential indicators, their inclusion must be guided by conceptual coherence, methodological rigour, and practical feasibility. To ensure that the selected indicators contribute to the assessment of poverty within a capability framework, three core criteria have been applied in the selection process.

First, each indicator must demonstrate conceptual consistency with the poverty literature. Indicators should be able to capture not merely the absence of economic resources or utilities, but the lack of real opportunities — or capabilities — to achieve functionings that individuals have reason to value. Second, indicators should reflect information across distinct evaluative spaces of well-being. This includes capturing not only resources, but also functionings, capabilities and utility. Including indicators across these spaces allows for a more acute assessment regarding how employment contributes to or constrains people's freedoms. Third, indicators must be measurable at the individual or household level, enabling their integration into empirical poverty measurement frameworks. This criterion ensures applicability in household surveys and labour force datasets.

Together, these three criteria guide the selection of a parsimonious yet robust set of indicators capable of capturing employment-related deprivations within multidimensional poverty measurement, while maintaining consistency with both theoretical foundations and empirical practice. We acknowledge that some dimensions of employment quality, such as job displacement due to automation and artificial intelligence (see for instance Chiarini et al., 2024), are relevant but not captured in our framework. While these technological risks are conceptually aligned with the capability approach and increasingly policy-relevant, they are not yet measured in standard household surveys.

In this context, indicators must capture an individual's capability to satisfy both material and non-material needs, aligning with the foundational principles of the capability approach.

We stress that this approach emphasizes the real freedoms people have to lead lives they have reason to value (Sen, 1999). To select relevant indicators for measuring multidimensional poverty—particularly in domains such as employment—it is essential to determine which element of the capability set is being appraised: resources (means to achieve), functionings (actual doings and beings), or well-being achievements (valued outcomes). For example, access to stable employment reflects resource endowments; consistent participation in safe and fair labour markets signals functioning achievements; and fulfillment through meaningful work or balance with family life aligns with well-being outcomes (Robeyns, 2005). Yet, isolating any one of these components in the selection of indicators risks providing a partial and fragmented picture of deprivation.

Furthermore, merging capability theory with MPI methodologies can enhance the conceptual and ethical grounding of poverty metrics. Whereas multidimensional poverty measures offer rigorous statistical tools for identifying and comparing deprivations across populations, capability theory offers a normative framework to justify why certain dimensions matter and how they relate to human flourishing. This synergy allows policymakers not only to diagnose deprivations but also to understand their implications for human agency and social justice (Clark, 2006; Comim et al., 2008). For example, in assessing the work dimension of an MPI, the capability approach helps prioritize indicators that reflect the freedom to choose decent and meaningful employment, rather than merely the absence of joblessness. This necessarily requires contemplating as many elements in the capability set as possible.

Ultimately, combining the capability approach and multidimensional poverty measurement allows for an enriched understanding of deprivation—one that is multidimensional not only in statistical construction, but also in philosophical depth. This integration ensures that policy responses informed by an MPI are more aligned with the complexities of human well-being and thus more effective in combating the interlocking disadvantages experienced by the poor.

4 Practical Considerations: Data Sources and Their Limitations

Reliable information on employment conditions is indispensable for multidimensional poverty measurement, yet it remains uneven across contexts. Official statistics—produced through household and labour-force surveys—often privilege metrics with immediate macroeconomic salience (participation, unemployment, wages), while leaving critical dimensions of job quality unmeasured. In what follows, we offer a detailed account of the principal survey instruments and international repositories that underpin global poverty monitoring, highlighting their methodological strengths and the persistent data constraints that complicate cross-national comparison and the analysis of vulnerable groups.

Coverage of employment-related indicators varies across major household surveys, with employment status and occupation or sector routinely captured in DHS, MICS, LSMS, and LFS, while hours worked, earnings, contractual arrangements, tenure, social security, and workplace safety are less consistently included. As a result, integrating an employment dimension into an MPI would require only a minimal survey expansion, particularly for DHS and MICS. Most of the necessary information is already standard in LFS and, to a

lesser extent, LSMS, implying that the main gaps concern earnings bands, contract type, job tenure, basic social security coverage, and exposure to workplace risks. In practical terms, this translates into adding approximately eight to ten well-tested questions to DHS or MICS instruments—a modest increase given their overall length—which can be drawn directly from established ILO Labour Force Survey standards. This approach ensures feasibility, comparability, and conceptual consistency while keeping the additional respondent burden low.

4.1 Labour Force Surveys

Labour-force surveys (LFS) are the backbone of national labour market statistics globally, conceived originally to deliver high-frequency estimates of participation, employment, and unemployment for macroeconomic policy (ILO, 2013). Their rotating-panel designs, exemplified by the U.S. Current Population Survey (CPS) and the Eurostat EU-LFS, generate quarterly or monthly indicators that inform central-bank decisions on growth and inflation (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2018). Moreover, many LFS programmes collect wages and hours data, enabling core measures of average earnings and labour-cost inflation.

Despite these clear advantages, LFS modules remain narrowly focused. Beyond income and hours worked, few surveys include standardized questions on contract type, occupational hazards, or worker autonomy. In Europe, ad hoc "quality of work" supplements have appeared intermittently since 2005 in the EU-LFS—but variations in question wording and periodicity across member states have thwarted harmonization (Eurofound, 2018). The EU-LFS database therefore confines itself to a core set of harmonized variables—temporary employment, shift work, overtime, multiple jobholding, and job tenure—while publishing earnings only in decile form, precluding analysis of living-wage attainment (Eurostat, 2025).

It is for this reason that the EU established the European Working Conditions Survey (EWCS) in 1995. This is the first comprehensive survey of working conditions that incorporates questions on all of the dimensions and indicators discussed above. Since its inception, the survey has been rolled out across all EU member states as well as in other countries, which are not EU members, such as Albania, Turkey, Macedonia, or South Korea. It was even applied twice in the United States - in 2015 and 2017 - as the American Working Conditions Survey (Maestas et al., 2017). Unfortunately, the EWCS is undertaken only every five years and includes limited samples from each country (approximately 1000 cases). Although the data is representative at the EU level, it cannot be disaggregated with any amount of detail at the country level (Green, 2026; Sehnbruch et al., 2026). It is therefore not an adequate tool for policymakers, but it does serve as a good example of the kind of questions that should be incorporated as a matter of course in standard labour force surveys.

A further limitation of surveys on employment concerns marginalized workers. Informal own-account operators, unpaid family workers, and casual day-labourers often fall outside standard sampling frames or are misclassified under broad "self-employed" categories (Chen, 2012). In addition, as Conen and Stein (2021) demonstrate, few labour force surveys collect consistent information on multiple jobholding. Consequently, vulnerability to poor-quality employment remains obscured in the very datasets intended to monitor labour market health Table 2.

Table 2 Work-related indicators in National MPIs

Country	Indicator											
	Underemployment	Informal work	Low wage	Unemployed	Child labour	Youth NEET	Lack of Social Security	Lack of pension	Unprotected disabled	No birth certificate	Dependency (within hh)	Dependency (from gov. Aid)
Afghanistan	X			X		X					X	
Angola				X	X	X				X	X	
Armenia	X	X		X								X
Buthan												
Chile		X		X			X	X				
Colombia		X		X	X							
Costa Rica	X	X	X	X				X	X			
Dominican Republic		X		X	X					X		
Ecuador	X			X	X		X					
El Salvador												
Ghana												
Guatemala		X			X							
Honduras					X		X					
Malaysia												
Maldives												
Mexico							X					
Mozambique												
Nepal												
Nigeria				X								
Pakistan		X		X								
Palestine	X		X	X		X	X					
Panama	X	X	X	X								
Philippines	X				X							
Rwanda												

Table 2 (continued)

Country	Indicator											
	Underemployment	Informal work	Low wage	Unemployed	Child labour	Youth NEET	Lack of Social Security	Lack of pension	Unprotected disabled	No birth certificate	Dependency (within hh)	Dependency (from gov. Aid)
Seychelles		**X**		**X**		**X**						
Sierra Leone												
South Africa				**X**								
Vietnam												

Source: UNDP and OPHI (2019)

4.2 Household Surveys

Household surveys—particularly the World Bank's Living Standards Measurement Study (LSMS), the Demographic and Health Surveys (DHS), and UNICEF's Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys (MICS)—provide rich individual- and household-level data that link employment conditions to poverty, education, health, and housing (Beegle et al., 2012; Croft et al., 2018). LSMS surveys typically include detailed modules on occupation codes, contract formality, tenure, hours, and social-security contributions, enabling nuanced analysis of informality and social protection coverage (World Bank, 2025). By contrast, DHS and MICS are designed primarily for demographic and health monitoring. Thus, they record only basic employment categories and broad bands of hours worked, limiting their utility for job-quality research (UNICEF, 2020). Table 5 in the Appendix compares these survey instruments systematically, showing that while LSMS provides comprehensive employment coverage, DHS and MICS require substantial enhancement to support our framework.

The breadth of LSMS and other household instruments, however, comes at the expense of frequency and depth in labour modules. Most LSMS rounds occur every three to five years, and budget constraints often preclude inclusion of extensive working-conditions questions. While longitudinal panels within LSMS cohorts can illuminate employment trajectories and transitions between formal and informal work (McKenzie, 2017), linkage to administrative tax or social-security records remains rare, restricting the capacity to trace the causal impact of job-quality changes on household welfare.

Of course, individual countries also run their own household surveys. These often have larger samples than labour force surveys, and frequently also include questions on employment and employment conditions. While these surveys, especially if they include a panel component, can be very useful in the analysis of poor-quality employment, they are often not carried out frequently enough to be useful to policymakers attempting to target resources to the employed as they do not capture the detail of fluctuations in employment and unemployment rates (Sehnbruch et al., 2026).

4.3 International Repositories and Harmonization Efforts

At the global level, repositories such as ILOSTAT and the World Bank's World Development Indicators (WDI) synthesize country-reported data into dashboards on employment shares, informality rates, average earnings, and social-protection coverage (ILO, 2024; World Bank , 2025). ILOSTAT's emphasis on SDG monitoring has expanded its coverage to working-poverty rates, occupational injury rates, and indicators of child labour, but all remain macro-aggregates and thus detached from the heterogeneous realities of vulnerable subpopulations. The WDI database provides series on unemployment, vulnerable employment (ILO definition), and sectoral employment, yet omits direct earnings measures and offers no microdata for disaggregation (Hovhannisyan et al., 2022).

These international databases exemplify the trade-off between global comparability and analytic depth. Harmonization efforts, such as the EU-SILC and ASEAN Harmonized Questionnaire, have achieved standard definitions for a limited set of indicators but have not moved far beyond the definition of basic variables. In particular, a lingering problem is that richer national surveys yield detailed portraits of job quality yet lack cross-country comparability, while standardized global series sacrifice nuance for coverage. Missing consistent

modules on informality, multiple jobholding, and working conditions perpetuate reliance on "informal employment" as a crude proxy for precarious work, underscoring the urgent need for expanded labour modules, harmonized survey design, and integration with administrative registers (Apablaza et al., 2024).

Despite notable heterogeneities in survey design, data availability, and institutional capacity across developing countries, we argue that a clear core of work-related indicators can emerge consistently within a wide set of national MPIs. Table 3 depicts the work-related indicators that are included and excluded from a wide range of nationally tailored MPIs.

Across the diverse set of national MPIs listed in Table 2, some labour-market dimensions may constitute a starting point towards a shared methodological core. First, note that **unemployment** features in half of the MPIs (e.g. Colombia, Costa Rica, South Africa). This may be reflecting a near-consensual recognition that labour market exclusion remains a primary pathway into multidimensional deprivation (Alkire & Santos, 2014; ILO, 2023). Second, the persistence of **informal employment** as an explicit indicator in roughly one-third of national indices (e.g. Chile, Pakistan, Guatemala) indicates that this is still considered an important characteristic. Although the binary nature of this indicator is insufficient to capture important nuances among both formal and informal workers, such as the fact that a significant proportion of formal jobs are of poor quality (Apablaza et al., 2024; González et al., 2021; Sehnbruch et al., 2020), but its prominence in Table 2 underscores the recognition of its strong empirical association with income instability, lack of labour rights, and exclusion from social protection systems (Chen, 2012; Sehnbruch et al., 2015).

Third, **underemployment**—operationalized as insufficient hours of work—appears in one-quarter of national MPIs, signalling that mere access to a job is insufficient if work time fails to secure a basic standard of living (Ghai, 2003). Fourth, gaps in **social-security coverage** (health insurance, pension contributions) recur across 18% of the sample (e.g. Chile, Costa Rica, Philippines), reflecting the growing consensus that "decent work" must encompass protection against illness, disability, and old-age poverty (Sen, 1999; ILO, 2023). Finally, the inclusion of **youth NEET** (Not in Employment, Education, or Training) in several Latin

Table 3 Summary of proposed domains

Domain	Primary Indicator	Primary Threshold	Fallback (if unavailable)	Fallback Threshold
Access	Employment status + hours	Unemployed >6mo OR <20 h/wk involuntary	Unemployment only	Unemployed >6mo
Compensation	Monthly earnings	<$2.15/$3.65/$6.85 PPP/day	Relative to median	<67% median wage
Security	Written contract	No written contract	SSC + payslip	No SSC AND no payslip
Stability	Tenure	Wage:<6mo; Self:<12mo	Contract type	Temporary/casual
Conditions	Hazards + protection	Red-list hazards OR (no health ins. AND no pension)	Hours + safety	>60 h/wk OR no equipment

Source: Own elaboration

American indices highlights emerging policy concerns about early-career exclusion and its long-term scarring effects on human capital (McKenzie, 2017; World Bank WDI, 2025).

Thus, there is indeed a solid conceptual backbone for the work dimension of MPIs and a practical roadmap for harmonization. From a capabilities perspective, embedding these indicators within poverty metrics aligns with the view that poverty is not solely an income shortfall but a deprivation of vital functionings, including secure and adequately remunerated work (Robeyns, 2005; Sen, 1999). Empirically and albeit imperfectly, cross-national comparability is possible while preserving the granularity needed to identify vulnerable subgroups—such as informal day-labourers or disconnected youth—who might otherwise be obscured in aggregate dashboards (Hovhannisyan et al., 2022; Conen & Stein, 2021). Going forward, aligning the definitions and data-collection protocols for these core work indicators can strengthen both national policy design and regional poverty-monitoring frameworks, fostering a more coherent global agenda for "decent work" and multidimensional well-being.

5 Proposal for a Pragmatic Work and Poor-Quality Employment Dimension that can be Incorporated Into the MPI

The establishment of a "poverty line" below which workers are considered to be deprived has gained considerable momentum since the idea was first put forward (Sehnbruch, 2006, 2008; Ortega Diaz, 2013; Huneeus et al., 2015; Sehnbruch et al., 2020; Florisson, 2022). Even researchers dedicated to the analysis of job quality now appreciate that it would be good to find an empirical method for distinguishing between "good" and "bad" jobs (Green and Lee 2024; Stephens 2023a). Since Sehnbruch et al. (2020) first applied the Alkire-Foster method to measuring deprivation in the labour market, their work has been replicated in many individual countries such as Bolivia, Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, Egypt, Poland, Spain and the UK (Carriel Bustamante et al., 2024; Deguilhem et al., 2022; Eberhard et al. 2023; Elmetwally 2022; García-Pérez et al. 2023; Kowalik et al. 2024; Murillo-Huertas et al. 2023; Prieto et al. 2022; Sehnbruch et al. 2025a; Stephens 2023a) and across regions such as Europe, Latin America and the MENA region (Apablaza et al., 2024; Dolcet et al., 2024; Frontenaud, 2023; Orfao et al., 2021). This indicates that there is both an international demand for generating measures of poor-quality employment, but also that such a measure can be developed for a broad range of countries, including both emerging and advanced economies. For example, a study undertaken for the World Bank, develops a measure for 42 developing countries (Hovhannisyan et al., 2022). This indicates that it is both necessary and possible to incorporate an employment dimension into national and international MPIs.

Nationally tailored multidimensional poverty indices (MPIs) have proliferated over the past decade, reflecting context-specific conceptions of deprivation and leveraging locally available data. While these national MPIs, including those of Mexico (CONEVAL, 2021) and Colombia (DNP, 2019) as the first ones to have been created, have proven invaluable for national policy and targeting, they pose important challenges for serving as foundations of an internationally comparable global measure that incorporates a coherent work-dimension.

First, as we have established, national MPIs differ markedly in their choice of indicators, cut-offs, and weights, reflecting divergent normative judgments and political priorities. They reflect national priorities, not international ones. For instance, India's MPI (NMPI) assigns a 1/3 weight to a "livelihood quality" sub-indicator that combines days worked and

social security coverage, whereas Mexico's MPI subsumes employment under a broader "social security" pillar with a distinct weighting scheme (Alkire & Seth, 2015; CONEVAL, 2021). Such heterogeneity in indicator selection and aggregation rules make it impossible to perform any sensible cross-country comparison: two individuals with identical deprivations in work conditions may register as non-poor in one country's MPI but poor in another's, purely by virtue of methodological divergences. This methodological plurality contrasts starkly with the stringent harmonization required for global poverty monitoring, as exemplified by the OPHI-UNDP's proposed global MPI framework, which stipulates uniform dimensions and weighting conventions (Alkire et al., 2020).

Second, data availability and quality vary widely across national contexts, particularly for work-related dimensions. Many national surveys capture informal employment, occupational safety, or working-time adequacy in rich detail (e.g., South Africa's Quarterly Labour Force Survey), while others rely on coarse proxies or omit these aspects altogether (e.g., countries lacking regular labour-force modules on job security). This inconsistency stems from differences in survey design, frequency, and administrative data linkages (UNECE, 2015). Attempting to reconcile these disparate datasets into a unified global MPI would either necessitate discarding richly detailed indicators—thereby losing analytical nuance—or imputing values for missing dimensions, which risks introducing bias and eroding the empirical robustness of any global work-dimension.

Third, the normative underpinnings of employment related indicators differ across cultures and welfare regimes, complicating the establishment of universal deprivation thresholds. In Latin America, informality is often posited as the primary marker of precarious work, whereas in advanced OECD countries, underemployment and atypical contracts may assume greater salience (Gasparini et al., 2015; OECD, 2018). The threshold at which part-time or gig work should be considered to be poor-quality employment thus depends on social expectations, labour market institutions, and the scope of social protection—factors that defy simple standardization. A global MPI that attempted to impose a single cutoff for "decent work" would risk cultural imperialism or, conversely, dilute the standard to the least demanding context, thereby masking significant deprivation elsewhere (Sen, 1999; Robeyns, 2005).

Finally, the aggregation of an employment dimension alongside traditional education, health, and living-standards components amplifies the tension between national relevance and global comparability. National MPIs often calibrate the contribution of employment to overall poverty in line with local policy salience—sometimes upweighting it to reflect recent structural shifts in employment—whereas a global measure must adhere to fixed weights to preserve comparability over time and across regions (Alkire & Santos, 2014). This rigidity may render the global MPI less responsive to emerging labour market challenges—such as the gig economy or climate-induced job displacement—that national indices can more nimbly address.

While nationally tailored MPIs with employment related indicators are indispensable for domestic policy formulation and for illuminating the multifaceted nature of working poverty, their methodological heterogeneity, data disparities, normative diversity, and aggregation complexities make them ill-suited as direct building blocks for an internationally comparable global MPI. Reconciling the twin imperatives of local relevance and global comparability will require concerted efforts to harmonize core work-dimension indicators, standardize survey instruments, and converge on norms for threshold setting—an endeavour that remains a frontier in multidimensional poverty measurement.

While our conceptual framework encompasses five broad subdimensions of employment quality, operational constraints necessitate a more parsimonious operationalization for MPI purposes. Skills development and worker voice, while conceptually important, lack clear poverty-threshold operationalizations in standard household surveys and are thus excluded from our minimal core but recommended for national extensions. In light of the discussion that we present in this paper, we argue that a parsimonious, yet comprehensive framework can be organized into five interrelated domains:

1. **Access to Employment.** This domain captures both unemployment and underemployment. While unemployment is relatively straightforward to measure, underemployment encompasses multiple facets—skill mismatch, insufficient wages, inadequate hours, or work outside one's expertise—that collectively impede a worker's capacity to achieve a decent living (Maynard et al., 2006). Crucially, distinguishing involuntary underemployment from voluntary underemployment permits a sharper identification of labour market restrictions that exacerbate multidimensional deprivation. Importantly, this domain must exclude child labour. Indeed, early-age labour participation often masks forced work or exploitative conditions. National legal thresholds vary—sometimes contradicting ILO conventions (Liebel, 2015)—but a harmonized MPI should adopt the stricter of national and international age standards to reliably flag child labour as a form of multidimensional deprivation.
2. **Monetary Compensation.** This domain captures whether labour income is sufficient to meet basic needs, a core condition for escaping working poverty. Earnings adequacy underpins economic security, yet self-reported salaries in household surveys are prone to error (Moore et al., 2000). Employing graduated wage bands—anchored to national poverty line, international standards (as suggested by the World Bank) or minimum-wage multiples—can enhance data reliability and facilitate cross-country comparability while preserving an objective poverty cutoff.
3. **Contractual Security**. Having a formal, written contract reflects a fundamental guarantee of access to social insurance, employment protection legislation as well as other labour rights such as access to formal dispute-resolution mechanisms. The mere presence of a written employment contract—whether permanent or fixed-term—is a clear signal of a worker's entitlement to agreed pay, notice periods, and legal protections. Including this domain distinguishes between off-the-books arrangements and formally recognized work, even where tenure may be short or benefits limited.
4. **Stability.** Tenure and formality jointly signal continuity in both monetary and non-monetary job benefits. A long-term employment contract signals job stability and potentially greater protection from Employment Protection Legislation (where it exists), which generally correlates benefits with job tenure. Similarly, for self-employed workers, job tenure allows us to distinguish between precarious "survival" work and sustainable entrepreneurial activity. Here, it is important to consider that in many developing contexts, self-employment represents a deliberate livelihood strategy rather than a default to informality (Nogales et al., 2019; Packard, 2007). The entrepreneurship literature distinguishes between opportunity entrepreneurs, who voluntarily pursue self-employment to exploit opportunities or gain autonomy, and necessity entrepreneurs, who do so due to limited wage-employment alternatives (Reynolds et al., 2002). For poverty measurement purposes, this heterogeneity poses challenges. Simply categorizing all self-employment as either "good" (entrepreneurial) or "bad" (informal/precarious) fails to capture

this complexity. Tenure in self-employment provides one useful signal: longer-duration self-employment may indicate sustainable business activity, while very short spells suggest failed entrepreneurship or temporary survival strategies. However, tenure alone is insufficient. Other indicators, such as formality, earnings adequacy, access to credit, and whether the self-employed person employs others, can help distinguish opportunity-driven entrepreneurship from necessity-driven survival work.

5. **Working Conditions.** Rather than an open-ended scale of workplace quality, a poverty measure necessitates clear deprivation cutoffs—such as exposure to occupational hazards or physical risks (Table 3)—that society deems unacceptable. Such indicators complement broader assessments of psychosocial stressors and career prospects in advanced economies (Eurofound, 2012), while maintaining interpretability for anti-poverty policy. Moreover, access to labour rights—health insurance, pension contributions, and paid leave—constitutes essential social protection for workers and their families (Sehnbruch et al., 2020). A nuanced poverty metric must record both compulsory and voluntary access to these benefits, recognizing that informal workers may secure coverage independently.

A summary of the proposed domains and their characteristics is presented in Table 3. The posited employment dimension is integrated into the MPI using the Alkire–Foster aggregation method, assigning equal weights to its five indicators to reflect conceptually distinct forms of deprivation while avoiding arbitrary prioritisation. At the aggregate level, employment can either be incorporated conservatively by reallocating weight from the living standards dimension, or treated as an equal fourth dimension alongside health, education, and living standards; the former is recommended for global MPIs to minimise disruption, while the latter may be appropriate in national contexts where employment deprivation is particularly salient. Poverty identification follows the standard cut-off of one third of weighted deprivations, ensuring that employment deprivation contributes to multidimensional poverty only when it coexists with other disadvantages, rather than classifying otherwise well-off individuals with poor jobs as poor. The resulting MPI is computed using the standard headcount and intensity measures, with robustness assessed through sensitivity tests around the poverty cut-off.

These domains not only mirror the core employment indicators observed in national MPIs (see Table 2) but also resonate with international frameworks from the ILO, OECD, and UNECE, as well as key contributions in the academic literature (Sehnbruch et al., 2020; Green, 2021). By embedding these domains within the capability-informed MPI structure—using clear deprivation thresholds, harmonized question modules, and context-sensitive calibration—researchers and policymakers can advance a more coherent global agenda on decent work. Such a measure would both preserve the analytical depth necessary to capture the lived realities of working poor and uphold the comparability required for tracking progress towards SDG 8 worldwide.

Some potential overlaps with existing global MPI dimensions are explicitly assessed to ensure that the employment-related domains add information rather than replicate existing measures. The greatest overlap risk arises between monetary compensation and asset ownership, as both relate to income. However, the compensation domain provides clear information gains by identifying the working poor, a condition that can be empirically tested through correlation analysis with other deprivations. A moderate overlap risk also exists between working conditions—particularly exposure to hazards—and health, but this is mitigated by focusing on prospective indicators of health risks to the entire household, such as

unsafe environments or lack of protective equipment, rather than realised health outcomes for any household member. By contrast, the overlap between access to employment and education is expected to be low, as education captures human capital while employment reflects labour-market access. This can be verified by examining deprivation rates across educational groups. Before finalising the domains, a formal protocol is applied, including redundancy analysis of deprivation indicators, Cramer's V between employment indicators and existing MPI components (see Alkire et al., 2022).

Taking a step further from the theoretical reflections we have posited so far is complex. Arriving at an adequate empirical operationalization of the domains and indicators discussed above is far from being an easy task. However, to start an in-depth discussion around such a data collection instrument, the Appendix to this paper proposes a set of structured questions that provide enough information to assess operationable indicators for an employment dimension in an internationally comparable MPI. This set of questions is based in standard household and labour force surveys. The critical additions for DHS/MICS surveys to enable an employment dimension in MPIs are questions 11 (written contract), 16–17 (social security), and 19–20 (occupational injuries), which together add approximately 3–5 min to survey administration. The proposal is based on two basic principles.

First is parsimony. These questions represent only a subsection of a more complex survey, not necessarily focused on working conditions, but that rather intends to capture several living conditions. Second is proven adequacy in the field. The proposed set of questions is mainly inspired by the 2021 version of the Chilean Longitudinal Social Survey questionnaire. The reason for choosing this survey as the main benchmark is that the labour module has been designed by pioneering academics in the domain of multidimensional job quality index creation (see Sehnbruch et al., 2020). To ensure consistency, the order, phrasing, and filters of these questions have also been checked against questionnaires used for other official surveys in the developing world, including the Bolivian Household Survey (https://anda.ine.gob.bo/index.php/catalog/88/data-dictionary) and ILO's Labour Force Surveys (https://www.ilo.org/surveyLib/index.php/collections/LFS).

The proposed survey instrument consists of 25 questions, six of which are left to be answered openly following the Chilean questionnaire. The answers to these questions could be transformed into closed ones, but the level of heterogeneity that the question can capture will be diluted. Our proposed module builds on Lugo (2007), who proposed a minimum employment module for household surveys. We extend this by: (1) AF-compatible deprivation thresholds for MPI integration; (2) incorporating post-2015 evidence that formality alone is insufficient (Apablaza et al., 2024); (3) social protection indicators; (4) poverty-calibrated thresholds anchored to international poverty lines versus general quality standards. Our contribution is methodological MPI integration.

The Level of Microdata To capture the reality of each household as accurately as possible, 24 out of the 25 questions are asked to all household members aged 5 and above. The reason is that working conditions for each household member naturally vary widely within the household, and the indicators need to take this heterogeneity into account. The lower age bound of 5 years is useful to detect any form of child labour. However, reliable measurement poses significant challenges since children may be unable or unwilling to report their work activities, proxy respondents may underreport due to social desirability bias or fear of consequences, and distinguishing harmful child labour from acceptable household

chores requires careful question design. While specialised child labour survey modules exist, they have not been routinely incorporated into large-scale household surveys used for MPI construction.

The Respondent Ideally, each person should respond about their own working conditions. However, this may be too costly and highly impractical. Thus, the respondent could be the head of the household, but it should be considered that this second-best option may increase measurement error, response inaccuracy, and/or the amount of missing information.

Age Ranges Besides the 5-year lower bound for the applicability of the questionnaire, the following age ranges must be considered for analytical purposes. Regularly, youth not in education, employment, or training (NEET) is a subset of the population aged 15–29 years old (Bâlan, 2014). The age of retirement is regularly around 65 years of age. It may be useful to consider workers who are still active after the age of retirement to denote some deprivations in the household.

Possible Disaggregation Following the highlighted indicators in Table 1, the proposed questionnaire allows to perform some basic disaggregation as per the SDG 8 framework. These include sex, migrant status, disability status, age, occupation, and economic sector. This can be considered as a lower-bound set of useful disaggregation, which can be supplemented by questions for other sections of the overall questionnaire.

6 Concluding Remarks

This paper has sought to build a conceptual and applicable bridge between the literature on poor-quality employment and the tradition of multidimensional poverty measurement, arguing for the inclusion of an employment dimension in internationally comparable Multidimensional Poverty Indices (MPIs). Our discussion has built upon theoretical reflection grounded in the capability approach, which emphasizes that poverty is not merely a lack of income, but a deprivation of essential capabilities that constrain individuals from leading lives they have reason to value. Employment—or more accurately, the QoE —stands out as a key domain where these deprivations are manifested. Indeed, employment conditions shape both the material foundations of well-being and the substantive freedoms necessary for human development.

We have argued that employment is inherently multidimensional, comprising not just access to employment, but also dimensions such as income adequacy, job security, working conditions, autonomy, and work-life balance. These dimensions matter not only for well-being, but also for policy. Yet, despite this importance, poor-quality employment remains largely invisible in current poverty metrics, particularly those designed for international comparison. While several national MPIs have incorporated employment-related indicators, they are meant to capture national-specific realities, and thus they differ in their scope, definitions, and weighting structures, undermining their comparability. Without a harmonized approach to capturing deprivations in employment, global poverty measurement remains incomplete and risks underestimating the true extent of hardship, particularly among the working poor.

Against this background, we have argued that it is both possible and necessary to construct a globally applicable employment-related dimension within the MPI framework, provided it adheres to a set of normative and methodological principles: conceptual clarity, empirical feasibility, and international comparability. By identifying five core domains—access to employment, monetary compensation, contractual security, employment stability, and working conditions—we offer a parsimonious yet comprehensive structure that can be adapted to diverse labour market contexts. These domains reflect the key deprivations most closely associated with poor-quality employment, and their operationalization can draw upon both existing survey instruments and improved data collection efforts.

Our premise is that integrating a well-defined employment dimension into MPIs will allow us to more accurately identify the working poor, in a large sense, and tailor policy interventions accordingly. It will also bring measurement practices into closer alignment with global normative frameworks such as the SDGs—particularly Goal 8 on Decent Work and Economic Growth—and with the ethical imperative to address not just whether people work, but how they work and under what conditions. We thus call for renewed scholarly and policy commitment to refining the metrics of poor-quality employment and embedding them within multidimensional poverty measurement frameworks. Doing so would not only improve the diagnostic power of MPIs, but also reaffirm the centrality of human dignity and agency in global efforts to eradicate poverty in all its forms.

6.1 A Possible Implementation Path

Implementation would follow a phased approach designed to ensure methodological robustness, institutional buy-in, and scalability. The first phase focuses on piloting the employment module over the initial two years in a small set of countries (specifically, low-income contexts with high informality and upper-middle-income countries with more heterogeneous labour markets) by (1) embedding the module in upcoming DHS rounds or (2) through integrated surveys. This stage prioritises methodological validation, including threshold testing, sensitivity analysis of the poverty cut-off, and disaggregation by gender, location, and sector, alongside structured consultations with statistical offices, labour ministries, international organisations, and civil society. This could include the reflexion whether to include a minimal core dimension (3–5 indicators) and an extended version of the measure (additional 3–5 indicators for national customization) based on the purpose of the measure. The second phase concentrates on refinement, synthesising pilot results to identify consistently performing indicators, adjust thresholds, and assess the need for global versus region-specific calibrations, supported by technical documentation, training materials, and expert review. This should be complemented with the correlational analysis and robustness check of the indicators, to prevent double counting. In the third phase, the refined employment dimension is incorporated into the global MPI for pilot countries, with parallel publication of the traditional three-dimensional MPI and an experimental four-dimensional version to transparently document changes in poverty headcounts, intensity, and dimensional contributions. The final phase focuses on scaling, expanding coverage to all suitable countries, encouraging routine inclusion of the module in household surveys, and establishing a regular review cycle to ensure continued relevance and comparability over time.

Appendix 1

Table 4 Dimensions and indicators of job quality

Dimensions	Indicator	Type
Economic Security	Total income from all work sources	Resource
	Access to social protection (insurance, pensions, subsidies)	Resource
	Access to credit or savings for emergencies	Resource
	Income stability and regularity	Capability
	Capability to meet basic needs through labour income	Capability
	Freedom to financially plan	Capability
	Risk of involuntary job loss	Capability
	Effective coverage of basic needs	Functioning
	Capability to save or invest	Functioning
	Perception of financial stability	Utility
	Satisfaction with income	Utility
Working Conditions	Total hours worked (across all jobs)	Resource
	Availability of protective equipment and safety measures at work	Resource
	Access to work-related health services	Resource
	Flexibility in working hours or location	Capability
	Possibility to take leave for health or caregiving	Capability
	Freedom to avoid overwork	Capability
	Working without risk of injury or illness	Capability
	Incidence of occupational injuries or illnesses	Functioning
	Absence of harassment and violence	Functioning
	Absence of work-related stress	Functioning
	Feeling of safety and well-being at work	Utility
	Perceived work-life balance	Utility
Skills and Fulfilment	Access to continuous education or training (formal and informal)	Resource
	Recognition of skills acquired in non-traditional work	Resource
	Opportunity to learn and apply skills at work	Capability
	Freedom to change occupation or sector if desired	Capability
	Freedom to be creative or solve problems	Capability
	Actual development of skills	Functioning
	Effective application of competencies in meaningful tasks	Functioning
	Successful transition to preferred jobs	Functioning
	Satisfaction with learning and growth opportunities	Utility
	Sense of professional progress	Utility
Autonomy and Voice	Type of contract and access to information on labour rights	Resource
	Existence of grievance or redress mechanisms	Resource
	Union or labour network membership	Resource
	Freedom to organize collectively	Capability
	Autonomy to decide how and when tasks are performed	Capability
	Ability to negotiate working conditions	Capability
	Participation in workplace decision-making	Capability
	Ability to refuse undignified or unsafe work without penalty	Capability
	Effective participation in individual or collective decisions	Functioning
	Fair and respectful treatment by colleagues or superiors	Functioning
	Recognition and appreciation of work performed	Functioning

Table 4 (continued)

Dimensions	Indicator	Type
	Perception of empowerment and control over working life	Utility
	Feeling of respect, pride, and purpose associated with work	Utility
Work-Life Balance	Time available for leisure, rest, or personal relationships	Resource / Capability
	Access to childcare, eldercare, etc.	Resource
	Capability to combine multiple roles (labour and care)	Capability
	Opportunity to participate in social or community activities	Capability
	Actual participation in personal and social activities	Functioning
	Maintenance of positive workplace relationships	Functioning
	Number of roles assumed (e.g., caregiver, worker, student)	Functioning
	Perceived stress or overload from multiple responsibilities	Functioning
	Feeling of belonging and connection in the work environment	Utility
	Satisfaction with integration between work and other life dimensions	Utility

Table 5 Comparison of survey instruments for mpi employment dimension implementation

Survey Family	DHS	MICS	LSMS	LFS
Periodicity	3-5 years	3-5 years	3-5 years	Quarterly/ Annual
Sample Size	5,000-30,000 HH	8,000-12,000 HH	3,000-15,000 HH	10,000-100,000+ HH
Employment Coverage	Basic (status, hours)	Basic (status, partial hours)	Comprehensive	Comprehensive
Other dimensions Coverage	Full	Full	Full	Minimal
LMIC Fieldability	High	High	Medium-High	High
Access Status	Public	Public	Public (restricted)	Varies by country

Appendix 2

Proposed questionnaire structure.

Section: General Information about all household members aged 5 or older		
City or municipality where the household lives (observed by enumerator):		
Item	Question	Answers
1	How many people are there in your household?	….. Persons
Only for household members aged 5 and older		
2	What is […..]'s sex?	1. Male 2. Female 3. Other
2	How old is […..]?	….. Years old
3	Does […..] live with any kind of disability?	1. Yes -> Move to question 3.a 2. No -> Move to question 4
3a	Which one?	Open question
4	Which country was [….] born in?	Open question
5	What city was […..] born in?	Open question
4	Who is the main contributor to the household income?	[…...] is the main contributor
5	Which situation best describes […...]'s situation during the last month	1. Works for pay on a full-time basis. 2. Works for pay on a part-time basis or does occasional jobs. 3. Studies and works. 4. Only studies → Move to question 21 and end the questionnaire for that person. 5. Is currently being trained for work only Move to question 21 and end questionnaire for that person 6. Retired or pensioned → Move to question 21 and end questionnaire for that person. 7. Engages in unpaid tasks (household chores, caring for children and others) → Move to question 21 and end questionnaire for that person. 8. Unemployed, actively seeking work → Move to question 22 9. Is sick or has a disability that prevents them from having a job → End questionnaire for that person. 10. Neither studies, works, nor actively seeks employment → End questionnaire for that person. 11. Does not know -> End questionnaire for that person
6	What is […..]'s main occupation?	Open question (e.g. teacher at secondary school, manager a company, fruit collector in the field)
7	What is the main economic activity in […..]'s workplace?	Open question (e.g. library, shoe factory, school, bank)

8	In their current job, […..] is	1. Employee or worker in a private company. 2. Employee or worker in the public sector (including state-owned enterprises or municipal government). 3. Member of the Armed Forces or law enforcement. 4. Employer or business owner (hires or pays on a contract basis one or more workers). 5. Works alone, has no employees. 6. Unpaid family worker. 7. Domestic service worker.
9	[…...]'s job is	1. Permanent 2. Seasonal or temporary 3. Occasional or casual 4. On probation 5. Fixed-term or temporary
10	How long has [….] been working in this job?	…... Years
11	Does […..] have a signed contract?	1. Yes, they signed it. 2. Yes, but they haven't signed it yet. 3. They don't have it.
12	Does […..]'s workplace have a registered tax-payer number?	1. Yes it does 2. No it doesn't
13	In a normal week, how many hours does [….] work?	1. …..... Hours during the week
14	What is […...]'s monthly earnings?	1. …..... LCU per month 2. Does not know -> Move to question 15
15	What is the range of […...]'s monthly earnings?	Range preferably computed in proportion to the national minimum wage
16	Does […..] contribute to the pension system?	1. Yes, their employer ratains the contribution from their salary 2. Yes, they contribute to the system voluntarily 3. No, they don't contribute
17	Does [….] have work-related health insurance?	1. Yes they do 2. They only have private health insurance 3. They don't have any insurancee 4. Does not know
18	Does [….] have right to vacation, sick or maternity leave?	1. Yes they do 2. No they don't 3. Does not know
19	Was [….] ever physically injured at the workplace?	1. Yes 2. No 3. Does not know
20	Was anyone ever physically injured or died at [….]'s workplace due to work-related circumstances over the last 12 months	1. Yes 2. No 3. Does not know

21	Would [….] like to work more time?	1. Yes 2. No 3. I don't know
22	How many hours more per week?	……. Hours per week
23	How long has […..] been looking for a job?	……. Weeks
24	Will this be [……]'s first job?	1. Yes 2. No -> Move to question 25 3. Does not know
25	Why did [….] lose their previous job?	Open question

Data Availability Data availability is not applicable to this article, as it does not contain an empirical section or involve the use of primary or secondary data.

Declarations

Conflict of interest The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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