Journalists' Toolkit

This note gives the first part of the toolkit for journalists who want to take a different perspective on economic news. It includes suggestions on:

- Key concepts and performance measures to focus on what really matters;
- Using the toolkit to analyse policy.

Key concepts and performance measures

Perhaps the simplest and most important concept in 99% is *mass impoverishment*. I coined this phrase to describe the situation in which even as the economy continues to grow, most people find themselves getting poorer.

This is a deliberate move away from talking about inequality (even though rising inequality is the largest single driver of mass impoverishment) for the simple reason that it is easy to argue *for* inequality but extremely difficult to argue *for* mass impoverishment. The opposite of inequality is equality, and there has never been a society with perfect equality – it is probably not feasible and may not even be desirable. But if equality is not the aim, then what level of inequality is the ideal? The discussion becomes very complex. Mass impoverishment is much simpler: it *is* happening[1], and it should *not* be happening. The ideal level is zero.

When politicians talk about the health of the economy, they tend to focus on two key measures of performance: 1) headline GDP growth (usually over a carefully selected timeframe) and 2) the state of public finances. The clear implication is that these are the two most important measures, that growth will solve all problems and that the state of public finances is so dire that everything (even growth) must be sacrificed to reduce the level of debt to GDP before disaster strikes.

As 99% made clear, growth, especially headline GDP growth, does *not* solve all problems. In the US for example, GDP growth of almost 150% since 1980 has translated into virtually no growth in real median wages. Since 2000, they have

1 (Office for National Statistics, 2019)

in fact fallen. And in the UK, although we constantly hear about the dire state of government finances, the truth is that Government Debt:GDP remains below its average for the last 300 years[2].

If GDP and Debt:GDP are *not* the measures we should focus on, what *are*? I suggest:

- the **impoverishment ratio**: the proportion of the population whose income has fallen in real terms (measured as segments rather than as individuals: there will always be some individuals whose incomes fall, but there is no reason why – for example – the bottom 25% of the population as a segment should see their incomes fall); and
- the **leave-behind ratio**: the proportion of the population whose real income has grown more slowly than real per capita GDP (again, measured as a segment).

An appropriate target for the impoverishment ratio in non-recessionary times is zero. Over the last 10 years, in the UK, the figure is around 90%. This represents an astonishing failure of government to manage the economy. But it has gone largely unreported, and certainly not achieved the level of press coverage given to GDP growth and deficit containment.

For the leave-behind ratio, the target should be slightly greater than zero to allow for some progressive redistribution, but it should certainly not be over 95% as it is at the moment. Perhaps 20%, or even less, would be an appropriate target.

And if these two measures become established, the question naturally arises: what sorts of policy will improve performance on these measures? The answer is surprisingly simple: *the government should focus policy on growing the pie and sharing it fairly*. In this framing of the issues, '*the size of the pie'* is represented by real *per capita* GDP; and each budget will either improve the prospects for the size of the pie or fail to improve those prospects. The sharing of the pie is determined by the trends in the impoverishment and leave-behind ratios. In this framing, there are only four types of policy (determined by whether they grow the pie or not and whether they share it fairly or not):

2 (Bank of England, 2016)

- **shared growth policies** which both grow the pie at a reasonable rate and share it fairly;
- **captured growth policies** which grow the pie but share it unfairly;
- **balancing policies** which do not grow the pie but improve the fairness of sharing; and
- **vulture policies** which neither grow the pie nor share it fairly.

		Ensuring Solidarity	
		Sharing the pie unfairly	**Sharing the pie fairly**
Creating Abundance	**Growing the pie**	***Type I: Captured Growth Policies*** *Balance with types II & IV* Widespread automation Large scale immigration Free trade with low-cost countries Unfunded tax cuts	***Type II: Shared Growth Policies*** *Focus policy here* Investment in: • R&D • Infrastructure • Education • Healthcare Direct job-creation Supporting Private Sector investment
	Not growing the pie	***Type III: Vulture policies*** *Avoid* Funding tax cuts by reducing benefits and public services Regressive tax changes	***Type IV*: Balancing Policies*** *Use to balance Type I policies* Raising the minimum wage Paying benefits to those in need Progressive tax changes

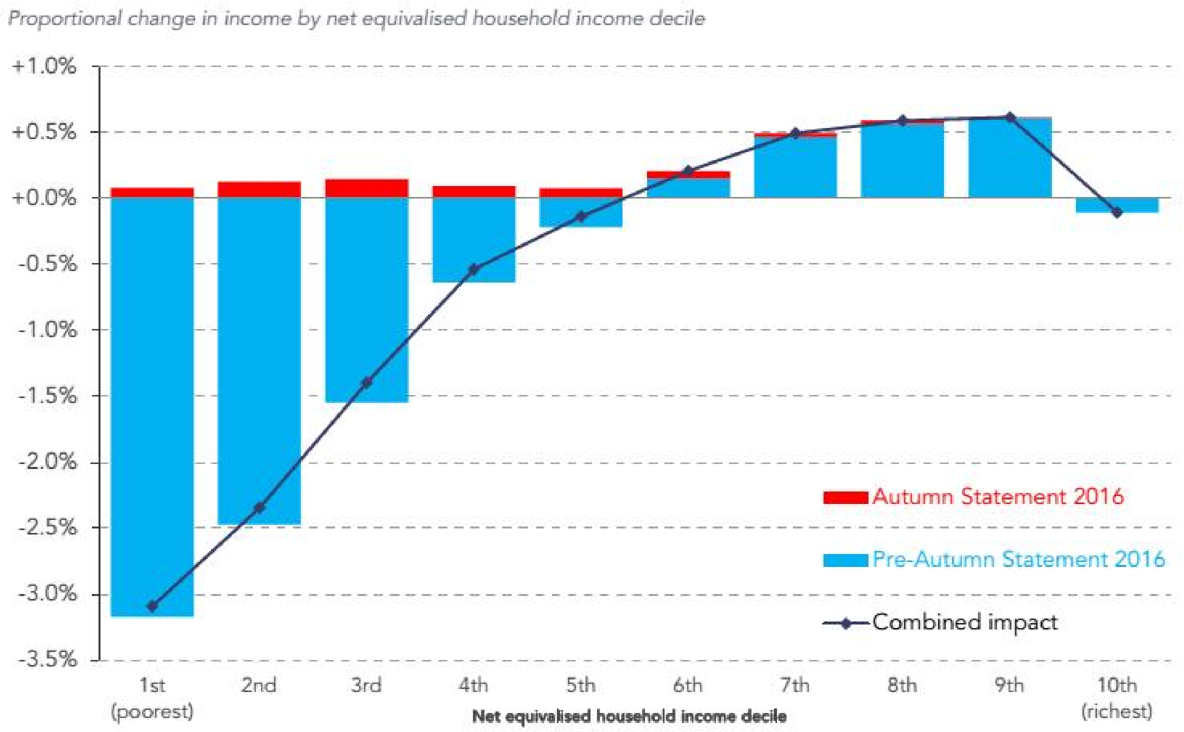
In fact, most politicians do talk about the need for Type II policies – but in recent years, they do not implement them (they are sacrificed to the 'need' to tackle the state of government finances).

Using this toolkit to analyse policy

For a journalist covering the Budget, this form of analysis is relatively straightforward: each Budget is already assessed by the Office for Budget Responsibility and the Institute for Fiscal Studies in such a way that data are available both on the impact of the budget on the economy as a whole (GDP) and on the different income segments.

The Resolution Foundation produces analysis like this:

Resolution Foundation analysis of impact of tax and benefit changes by income decile[3]



Notes: Includes impact of National Living Wage, announced income tax cuts, additional hours of free childcare, removal of family element, fuel duty freezes, limiting support to two children, work allowance cuts, pension tax relief cuts, Class 2 NICs abolition, benefit freeze & reducing UC taper to 63 per cent. Assumes full entitlement take-up, UC 80 per cent rolled out & measures affecting new claims/births half in place

Source: RF analysis using the IPPR tax-benefit model & OBR, *Economic and Fiscal Outlook*, November 2016

Since growth is set to be well below long-term trend levels, this means we are looking at a *Vulture Budget*.

Similarly, it is clear that Brexit will reduce the size of the pie[4] (relative to staying in the EU). A hard Brexit would be accompanied by widespread business failure and unemployment. Prices of businesses, property and land would fall significantly. Probably public spending would 'need' to be cut further

3 (Corlett, Finch, Gardiner, & Whittaker, 2016)
4 (House of Commons exiting the EU committee, 2018)

– but there would be excellent buying opportunities for anyone who had positioned most of their wealth off-shore and denominated in a currency other than sterling. A hard Brexit is a vulture policy.

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