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The Incidence of Recent Child Health Improvements

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ABSTRACT

Economic growth has accelerated over the past 10–15 years in many poor countries, especially in Africa. This is welcome news that is widely discussed, including in the popular press. But even as economies grow, some analysts have expressed concerns that such growth is not having as significant an impact on poverty as one would hope. Analysts and policymakers are asking whether this growth is adequately pro-poor, shared, or inclusive. Less noticed, but equally important, is the fact that improvements in children's health are accelerating, too. This paper examines the extent to which these health improvements are equitably shared or "inclusive." We propose a descriptive method for this analysis that is analogous to growth incidence curves and apply it to seven countries from Africa, Asia, and Latin America over the past two decades. We draw two principal conclusions. First, within countries, health improvements often have a different distribution than income/expenditure growth, and that distribution is usually more hopeful in the sense that it is more likely to be relatively pro-poor than the distribution of income growth. Second, we have yet to see clear patterns in terms of the within-country relationship between growth incidence curves and health improvement incidence curves. Thus, one cannot rely on the information in the growth incidence curve alone to infer the inclusiveness of health improvements.

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INTRODUCTION

This paper sits at the intersection of two important literatures about improving living standards and poverty reduction. The first literature addresses the distribution of income growth. Many developing countries have enjoyed an acceleration of economic growth over the past 10–15 years, welcome news that is widely discussed, including in the popular press (*The Economist* 2011; African Development Bank 2012). But even as economies grow faster, some analysts have expressed concerns that such growth is not having as significant an impact on poverty as one would hope because it is disproportionately concentrated among the better off. Such concerns for "pro-poor growth" or "shared growth" or "inclusive growth" lead to a closer examination of the distributional consequences of recent economic growth (African Development Bank 2012; Kimenyi 2006; Younger 2013).

The second literature concerns poverty or welfare as a multidimensional phenomenon. In recent years, Sen's widely accepted theoretical argument that poverty must be understood as deprivations in multiple dimensions of well-being has found a variety of empirical approaches and applications (Sen 1976; Alkire and Foster 2007, 2011; Duclos, Sahn, and Younger 2006 a,b). While economic growth is welcome, and pro-poor growth even more so, improvements in incomes are not synonymous with poverty reduction or improved living standards. Broad measures of improvements in living standards must consider welfare in multiple dimensions.

Our purpose here is to consider the extent to which improvements in children's health are distributionally progressive, or pro-poor. We choose this particular dimension of well-being because, like incomes, there has been a marked acceleration of improvements in children's health in the past 20 to 30 years. Table 1 gives trends in infant mortality and children's heights and weights over the past four decades, based on simple averages of countries in sub-Saharan African, South and Southeast Asia, and Latin America. In Africa, infant mortality has improved throughout, though the reductions decelerated in the 1990s and accelerated in the 2000s. Both stunting and underweight actually worsened in the 1990s before returning to improvements in the 2000s.¹ For all three indicators, the share of countries showing an improvement increases noticeably in the past decade.

¹ There are not enough countries with anthropometry data in the 1970s to include in the table.

	Sub-Saharan Africa		Latin America and Caribbean		East Asia and Pacific		South Asia	
Year	Infant Mortality Rate	Stunting Prevalence	Infant Mortality Rate	Stunting Prevalence	Infant Mortality Rate	Stunting Prevalence	Infant Mortality Rate	Stunting Prevalence
1990	177	48	54	23	42	47.2	129	61
2012	98	38	19	11	12	29.0	60	38

Table 1 – Improvements in Child Health, 1990-2010

Data Source: http://www.data.unicef.org/resources/2013/webapps/nutrition#

As with growth, these improvements are encouraging, though they have received much less attention (see Demombynes and Trommlerova (2012) and WHO (2013)). It is also important to understand *whose* health is improving. In particular, to what extent can we say that these gains are "pro-poor" or "inclusive?" This paper addresses such distributional concerns, focusing on two questions. The first is to address how health improvements are distributed, both across the income distribution and across the health distribution. The second is to determine whether there is a similar pattern in growth incidence curves for income (or, more precisely, expenditures) and health incidence curves. That is, are changes in the distribution of expenditures and health similar to each other? One reason to expect that this would be the case is that there is a static correlation between income and health. But, this does not necessarily say much about whether there is a relationship between the distributions of *improvements* in income and health across the population.

METHODS

Ravallion and Chen (2003) propose a simple and elegant tool for examining the extent to which economic growth is pro-poor, the growth incidence curve. For a cumulative distribution of incomes F(y), let *p* be the quantile associated with a given income so that p = F(y). *p* ranges from 0 (the poorest quantile) to 1 (the richest). Inverting this gives a quantile function, $y(p) = F^{-1}(p)$. The growth incidence curve (GIC) is:

$$g_t(p) = \frac{y_t(p)}{y_{t-1}(p)} - 1 \tag{1}$$

This curve shows how much income at the p^{th} quantile has grown at time *t*, graphing it for all values of *p*. Note that the GIC does not require panel data. We only need to know the income associated with the p^{th} quantile at each point in time,² so consecutive cross-sections are sufficient. Estimating $y_t(p)$ is straightforward, requiring only that we order the data from poorest to richest and identify the income at each quantile.

² This is consistent with the symmetry axiom for poverty measures.

Figure 1 gives an example for Uganda. Household expenditure per capita increased throughout the expenditure distribution in these two decades, but the increase was considerably larger at the higher quantiles.

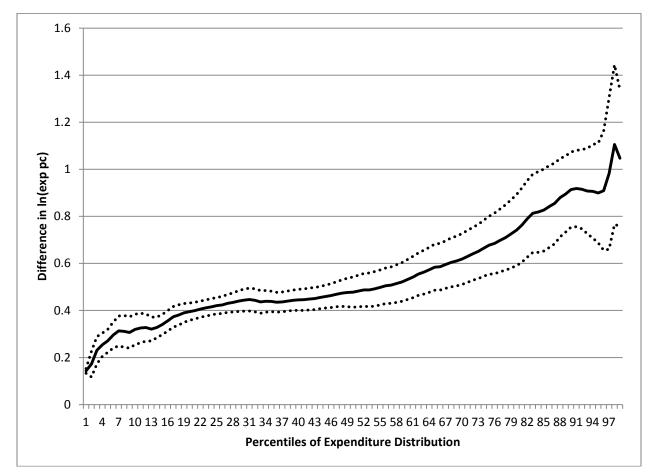


Figure 1 – Growth Incidence Curve for Uganda, 1998 to 2011

Source: Authors' calculation, Uganda Integrated Household Survey, Uganda Panel Household Survey, and Demographic and Health Surveys.

The growth incidence curve has several straightforward and useful properties (Ravallion and Chen 2003):

- if $g_t(p)$ is constant for all p, then growth is uniform across the income distribution. The Lorenz curve remains unchanged as do most scalar measures of inequality;
- g_t(p) is greater than average growth if and only if y_t(p)/µ increases over time: incomes at quantile p can only grow more than average if quantile p's share of overall income increases;
- if *g*_t(*p*) is a decreasing (increasing) function for all *p* then inequality falls (rises) over time for all inequality measures satisfying the Pigou-Dalton transfer principle; and

• if the GIC is positive everywhere, then there is first-order dominance of the distribution at date *t* over *t*-1, and vice-versa.

Whether or not a GIC such as Uganda's constitutes "pro-poor" growth is debated. Ravallion and Chen (2003) take an "absolute" approach, arguing that because incomes of the poor grew unambiguously, the growth was "pro-poor."³ Other authors prefer a relative definition of "pro-poor" growth, arguing that not only should the incomes of the poor grow, they should grow by more than those of the rich, i.e., inequality should decline.⁴ That is clearly not the case in Uganda for the past two decades. Regardless of which definition one prefers, the GIC is a useful tool for summarizing the distribution of income growth.

By strict analogy, we can generate health improvement incidence curves (HIICs) by replacing income with a measure of health, e.g, children's height:

$$dht_t(p) = \frac{ht_t(p)}{ht_{t-1}(p)} - 1$$
(2)

where $ht_t(p)$ is the height at the p^{th} quantile of the height distribution at time *t*, though it is probably easier to interpret the change in absolute terms for height, with the result measured in centimeters:

$$dht_t(p) = ht_t(p) - ht_{t-1}(p)$$
 (3)

All of Ravallion and Chen's welfare arguments follow for this curve if we take height as a measure of well-being.⁵ Figure 2 gives an example. Except for the extreme quantiles, the distribution of height gains has been fairly uniform across the height distribution in Uganda.

³ Ravallion and Chen (2003) use the Watts index as a social welfare function to arrive at this definition.

⁴ Araar et.al. (2009) give a thorough review of both approaches.

⁵ Switching to the absolute difference in Equation 3 requires using the FGT(1) poverty index rather than the Watts index.

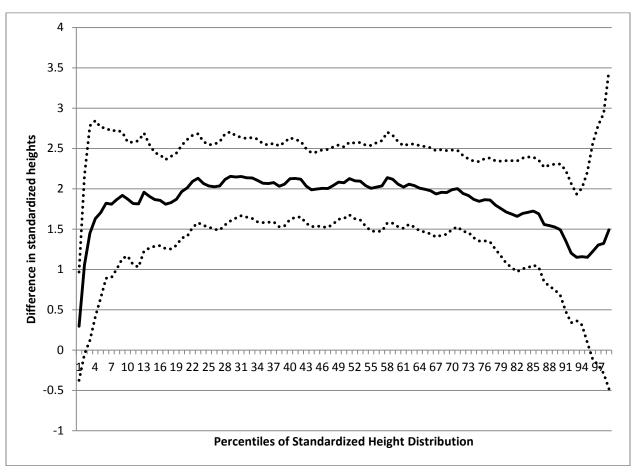


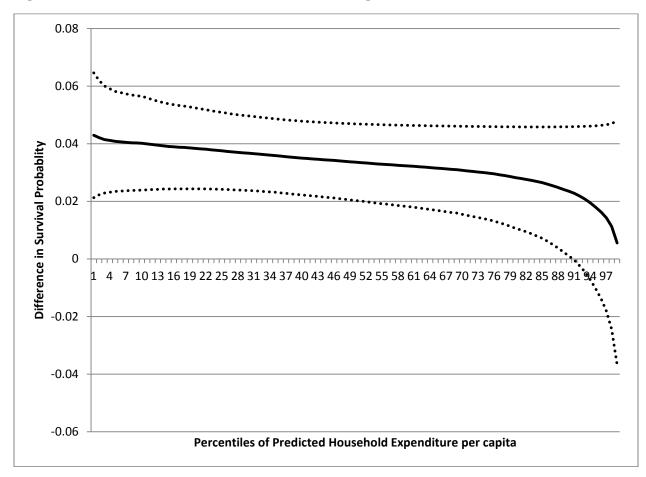
Figure 2 – Growth Incidence of Children's Heights, Uganda, 1988 to 2011

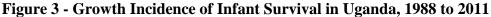
Source: Authors' calculation and Demographic and Health Surveys.

Even though this application is straightforward, it may not reflect policymakers' most important distributional concern. Instead, one might want to know about the distribution of heights across the income distribution. That is, are height gains larger for children in income poorer or richer households? We can answer that question with a "gradient health improvement incidence curve (GHIIC)":

$$dght_t(p) = ht_t(y_t(p)) - ht_{t-1}(y_{t-1}(p))$$
(4)

where $ht_t(y_t(p))$ is the height associated with the p^{th} quantile of the income distribution rather than the height distribution. Estimation of $ht_t(y_t(p))$ requires a regression, which we do nonparametrically using local linear regression. The difference between Equations 3 and 4 is analogous to the univariate vs. gradient approach to health inequality (Pradhan, Sahn, and Younger 2003; Sahn and Younger 2006), but here, we are examining changes in health status rather than its level. This GHIIC curve does not have the clean welfare economics interpretation of the growth incidence curve or the HIIC—its associated welfare function would have to be multivariate as would judgments about changes in that welfare—but it does yield answers to the question posited in the preceding paragraph: where in the income distribution are heights improving, and by how much. Another advantage of this approach is that the measure of health can be discrete, such as infant mortality. For such a measure, there could not be a univariate HIIC, just two mass points at 0 and 1 (infant death and infant survival). But it is possible to regress infant mortality (or survival, to keep the welfare-improving derivative positive) on income and graph the resulting estimated probabilities against the quantiles of the income distribution.





Source: Authors' calculation, Uganda Integrated Household Survey, Uganda Panel Household Survey, and Demographic and Health Surveys.

Figure 3 gives an example for infant survival. Here, the probability of surviving to one's first birthday has increased across the entire income distribution, with the largest gains at the lowest income quantiles. Thus, in both absolute and relative terms, these gains are "pro-poor."

DATA AND VARIABLES

The best sources of child health indicators over extended time periods in Africa are the Demographic and Health Surveys. We focus on children's heights and infant survival because those variables are available from the very first DHS, circa 1990, up to the present, allowing us the longest perspective possible.⁶ That infant survival is a measure of well-being seems obvious. Children's heights are recognized as a good general measure of health of pre-school age children and serve well as a measure of children's health histories.⁷ We have not used under-five mortality because that would require using only children older than five to avoid the censoring problem. That both reduces the sample size (which matters for the very imprecise mortality regressions) and requires us to associate mortality more than five years prior to the survey with incomes at the survey date. We have also not used weight because increased weight does not unambiguously indicate improved health.

The main problem with the DHS for our purposes is that they do not collect income or expenditure information. To deal with that, we have used income and expenditure surveys from the same countries to predict household expenditure per capita. This involves regressing the log of expenditures per capita on a set of variables that are available in both the income/expenditure survey and the DHS. These include household ownership of certain assets, characteristics of the household's dwelling (roof, wall, and floor materials; access to electricity), the household's source of drinking water and type of toilet facility, and the education of the child's mother⁸ and the household head. We then use the resulting coefficient estimates to predict the log of household expenditures per capita in the DHS data.⁹

In Uganda, we matched each DHS survey to an income/expenditure survey that was done as close to the same time as possible: the 1988 DHS to the 1992 Income and Expenditure Survey; the 2000 DHS to the 1999 National Household Survey; and the 2011 DHS to the 2009 Panel Household Survey. We found, however, that it made little difference to our results if we used only the 2009 Panel Household Survey to estimate the expenditure prediction function for each DHS. In the other countries, then, we use only one income/expenditure survey,¹⁰ which is convenient because in some countries we cannot easily match DHS to income/expenditure survey.

⁶ More recent surveys have further indicators of interest, including hemoglobin measures for children and their mothers and maternal mortality measures. We will explore these in future work.

⁷ Pradhan, Sahn, and Younger (2003) have an extended discussion of height as a measure of well-being.

⁸ Most income and expenditure surveys do not allow us to identify the mother(s) of the children in the household, so we define a "main female" in this order: the spouse of the household head; the mother of the household head; the sister of the household head, in order of age; any other adult female, in order of age. This person's education level is matched to the mother's in the DHS survey.

⁹ The DHS do calculate an "asset index" by applying principal components to most of the indicators in our list. This is often used as a proxy for income. However, because each indicator is discrete, the resulting asset index is lumpy, blurring the calculation of fine quantiles. Our inclusion of the two years of education variables helps to make our measure much more continuous. It also gives it an interpretable scale, though that is not important for this analysis. We did compare parametric regressions of height, weight, and infant survival on the DHS asset index and our measure for Uganda, using polynomials of first to fourth order. Our measure has a larger R² in each instance.

¹⁰ Appendix 1 lists all the surveys we have used.

To estimate the regression of health status on expenditures for the GHIIC, was use local linear regression, selecting the bandwidth with a cross-validation that minimizes the leave-one-out sum of squared errors.¹¹ We estimate the standard errors using a bootstrap that accounts for the sampling design of the DHS.

RESULTS

We have estimates for seven countries: Bangladesh, Cameroon, Colombia, Madagascar, Malawi, Peru, and Uganda. We selected these based on their having DHSs available over roughly 20 years and accessible income/expenditure surveys. In the case of the Africa, we selected countries from Eastern, Western, and Southern Africa, as well as Francophone and Anglophone countries. In Figure 4, we first present the growth incidence curves, which while not our focus, we use as a source of comparisons with the gradient health improvement incidence curves. Take the case of Uganda, which achieved the highest level of growth in per capita expenditure distribution across the two periods for which we have data. Although incomes improved among those in the lower end of the expenditure distribution, and thus there was pro-poor growth in absolute terms, this growth is not pro-poor in a relative sense since the incomes of the rich grew more than the incomes of the poor. GICs for the other three African countries show that average growth is much slower, or negligible (especially in the case of Cameroon), and in none of these countries is it pro-poor in relative terms, and likewise, in Cameroon and Malawi there is no pro-poor growth in absolute terms. In the cases of Madagascar and Malawi, the limited growth that occurred is concentrated in the upper end of the per capita expenditure distribution. In Malawi, for example, there is virtually no growth in per capita expenditures across 80 percent of the expenditure distribution; then there is a sharp upward slope of the curve indicating that there was measurable growth in expenditures among the wealthiest quantiles of the population. This is exactly the pattern of growth that skeptics worry about.

Among the three non-African countries, Colombia and Bangladesh show a similar patterns of more of the economic growth being concentrated at among those at the higher end of the income distribution, despite that some growth is observed even for the poor. Peru stands out because it is the only country where the growth in per capita incomes is greater for those at the lower end of the expenditure distribution.

Next we present the GHIICs using child's heights and infant survival as our health measures (Figure 5). There is one important pattern observed across all four African countries: health improvement is more equitably distributed, especially in the economies with more growth. Looking at the GHIICs, we see a dramatically different picture from the GICs; there is little evidence of pro-rich growth in relative terms. Among the infant survival curves, Uganda and Malawi are unambiguously pro-poor in absolute and relative terms. In Madagascar and Cameroon, while there is a notable upward slope in the curve at the top end of the income distribution, across 90 percent of the distribution the GHIIC is pro-poor in relative and absolute terms. A similar story is found for the two Latin American countries, Colombia and Peru, but in these cases, the upward slope in the curve occurs above the 95th percentile. The exception to the

¹¹ We did truncate this bandwidth at 1, or a 100% difference in income, at the top end. Some of the infant mortality regressions want to use a very wide bandwidth, leading to essential linear regressions. This is probably because prediction of infant mortality is so imprecise.

pro-poor GHIIC for infant survival is Bangladesh. Here the curve is flat, which we can see by examining not only the curve itself, but the confidence intervals as well.

When we use child heights instead of infant survival as our health metric, the progressive story about health improvements applies to Bangladesh, as well as most of the other countries. Perhaps the one clear exception is Cameroon where the curve is more U-shaped, with a relatively steep upward slope beginning above the 90th percentile. In a couple of other cases, the downward slope across most of the expenditure distribution is reversed at the upper end, a case in point being Uganda. Thus, in sum, we find that almost all countries have health improvements across most of the income distribution, including the low end, and that this health improvement is absolutely pro-poor. This story regarding the pro-poor nature of the GHIICs contrasts with the case for GICs, where pro-poor growth is quite rare.

In considering this phenomenon, one possible explanation is that among the poor, the increased availability of health and related public health measures has allowed for an improvement in the health of the poor, even though their incomes and expenditures have not grown. This can be considered a success for the public and non-governmental organizations that deliver such services. It may also reflect greater returns to health spending for the poor.

The health improvement incidence curves (HIICs) in Figure 6 show a decidedly mixed picture. One consistent finding is that heights increased across the entire distribution in all countries, with the exception of Cameroon where this only applied to the upper half of the height distribution. In Bangladesh, Colombia, and Peru, there are large increases in standardized heights across the entire distribution and the pattern of improvement is markedly progressive. Thus, child health improvements in these countries are large and both absolutely and relatively pro-poor. For Madagascar, there is a clear upward slope in this curve, implying that the health improvements are concentrated in the upper end of the health distribution. Interestingly, the levels of malnutrition are highest in Madagascar, which may in part explain the large improvements shown, and although they are most concentrated at the upper end of the distribution as well. The Malawi and Uganda curves are flat, although there is absolute improvements in the HIIC is Cameroon, and in that case, there is a slight upward slope to the curve, so it is also not relatively pro-poor.

CONCLUSIONS

Economic growth has picked up in developing countries, a welcome fact that seems beyond dispute. Nonetheless, concern remains over the distribution of the participation in this growth, particularly in developing countries where poverty and poor health remain formidable challenges. Similarly, the evidence is compelling that health improvements are widespread, including in countries that have not witnessed substantial improvements in economic performance. This presumably reflects the increased availability and utilization of health care services and public health measures, which often are not directly related to higher income or poverty reduction. But just like with income poverty, there is a legitimate concern as to who is benefiting most from the improvements in health, the issue we take up in this paper. We develop a method to generate health improvement incidence curves (HIICs). These are analogous to growth incidence curves but replace data on changes in expenditures with two measures of

health—infant survival probabilities and child heights—where the ordering of well-being is also the health indicator itself. Additionally, we develop the concept of the "gradient health improvement incidence curve (GHIIC)" to address whether the height gains are larger for children in *income* poorer or richer households. The difference between HIICs and GHIICs is similar to the univariate vs. gradient approach to health inequality, but, here, we are examining inter-temporal changes in health rather than health status itself.

Our results deliver a clear and important message to those concerned with multi-dimensional poverty reduction: one cannot limit the analysis to income alone—the distributional benefits of income growth differ from those for health gains. In particular, why we find that economic growth over the spells we examine tends not to be pro-poor, the opposite is true for health, at least when we look at the change in the gradient between expenditures and health outcomes using the HIICs. The story is more mixed when we adopt a univariate approach to health inequalities, as shown in the GHIICs.

In looking at the results across different incidence curves for a given country, it is also clear that the relationship between the shape of the GIC, the HIIC, and the GHIIC is not consistent. Or put differently, the incidence of income growth and health improvements is certainly not the same *within* a country. We therefore cannot predict what the health improvement curves will look like based on the growth incidence curves that economists and those concerned with income inequality using focus on. This reinforces the lessons we have argued for in our earlier work (Duclos, Sahn and Younger 2006 a, b) that poverty or welfare is a multidimensional phenomenon. Thus, we have added a new empirical approach or application in support of Sen's widely accepted theoretical argument that poverty must be understood as deprivations in multiple dimensions of well-being, Finally, despite the suggested patterns that we observe across countries regarding health improvements, it is worth expanding the analysis to more countries, especially in Asia.

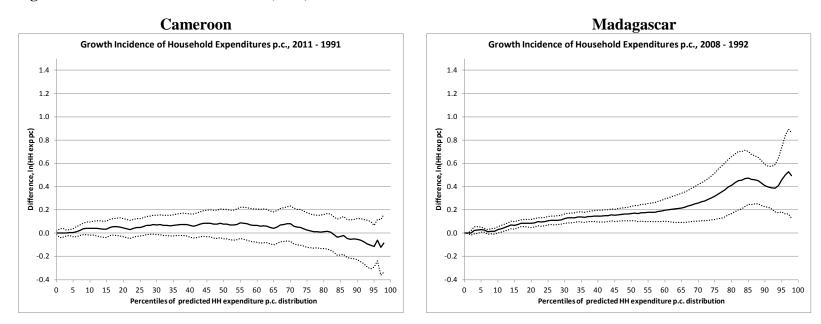


Figure 4 – Growth Incidence Curves (GIC)

Uganda

Malawi

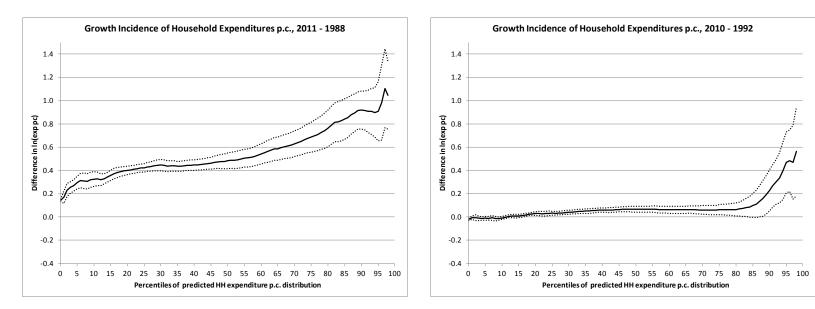
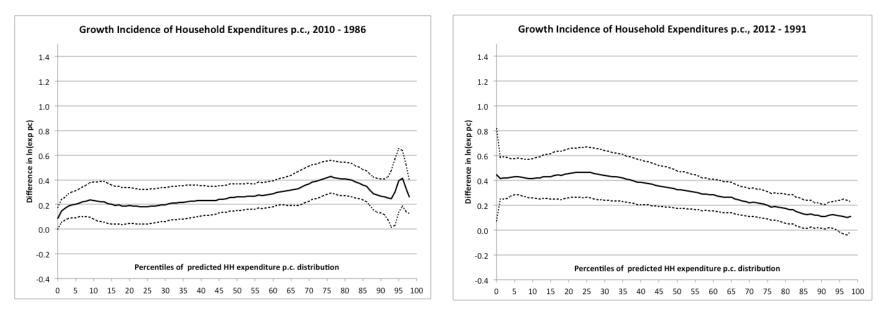


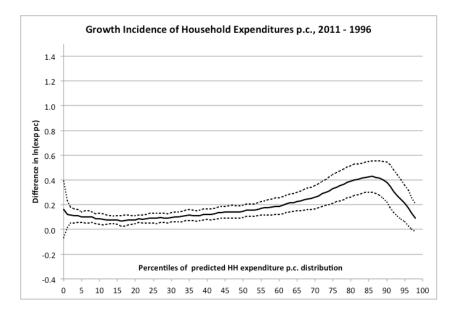
Figure 4 – Growth Incidence Curves (GIC) cont.

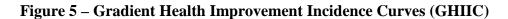


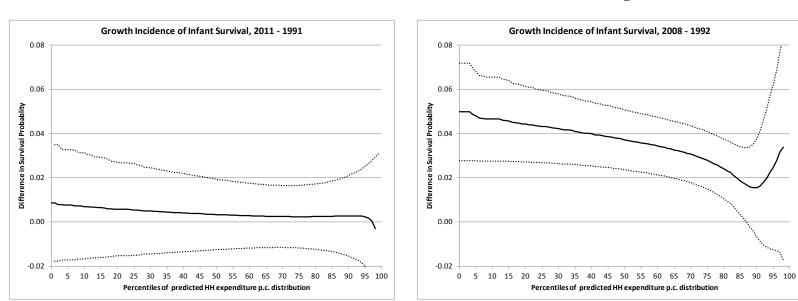
Colombia

Peru

Bangladesh

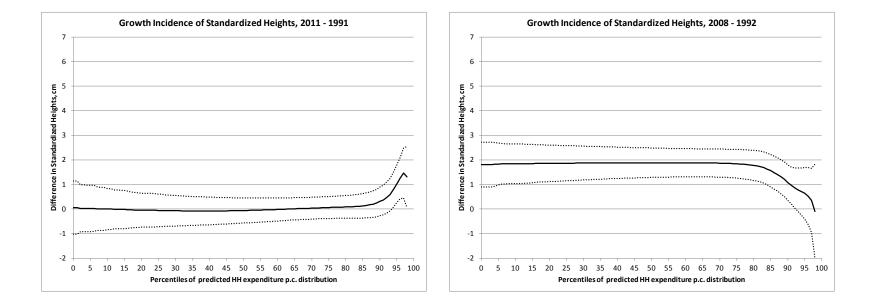


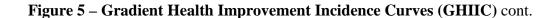


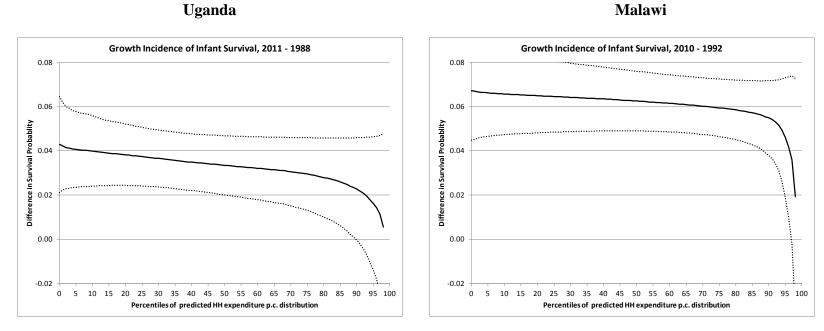


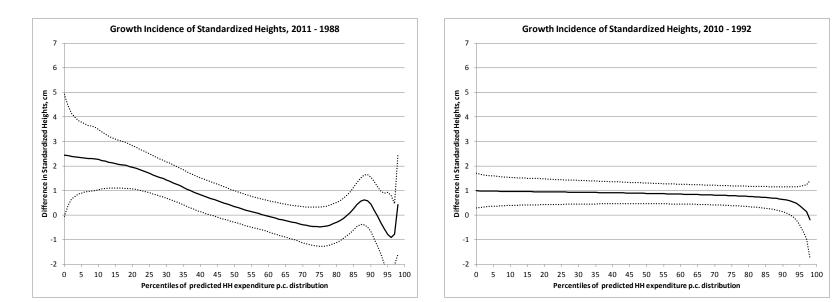
Cameroon



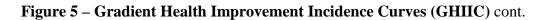


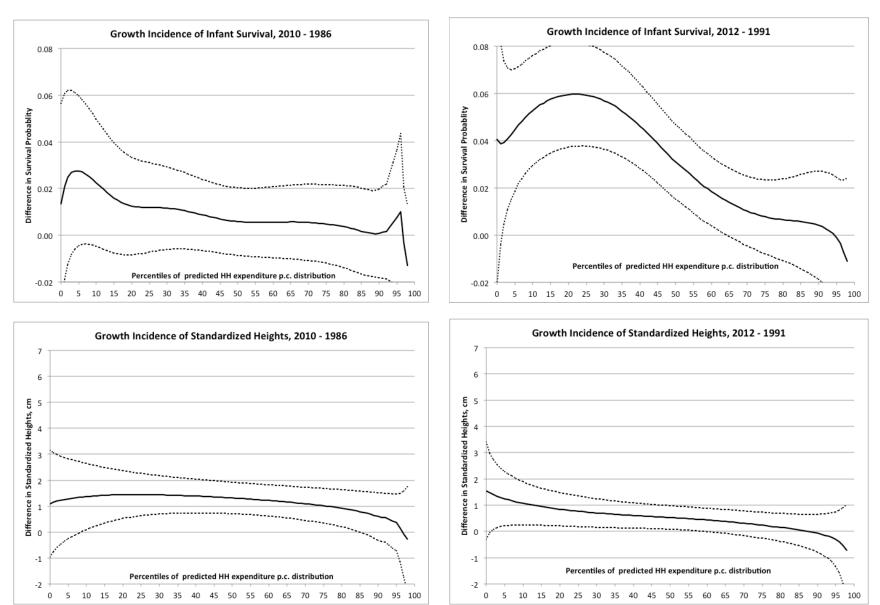






Malawi

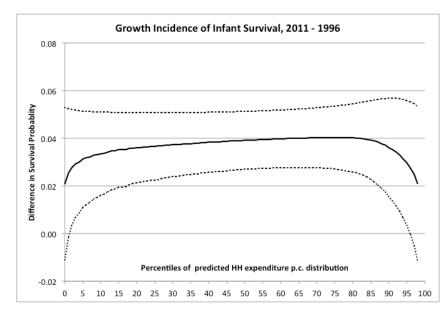




Colombia

Peru

Figure 5 – Gradient Health Improvement Incidence Curves (GHIIC) cont.



Bangladesh

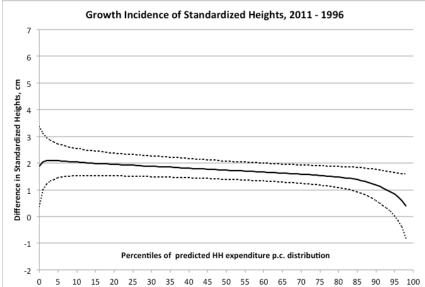
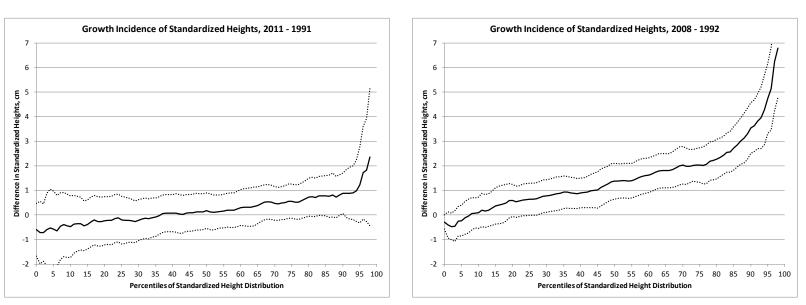


Figure 6 – Figure Health Improvement Incidence Curves

Cameroon





Malawi

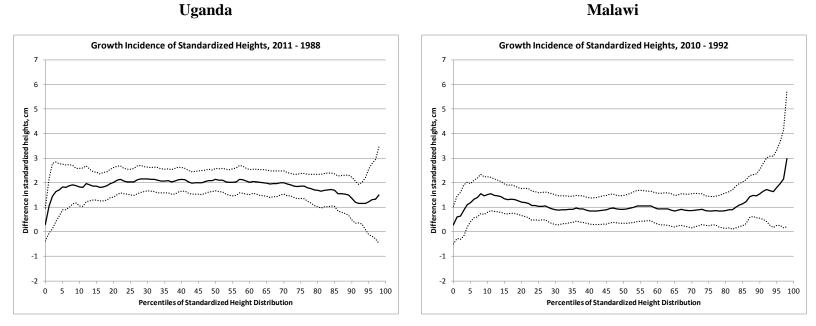
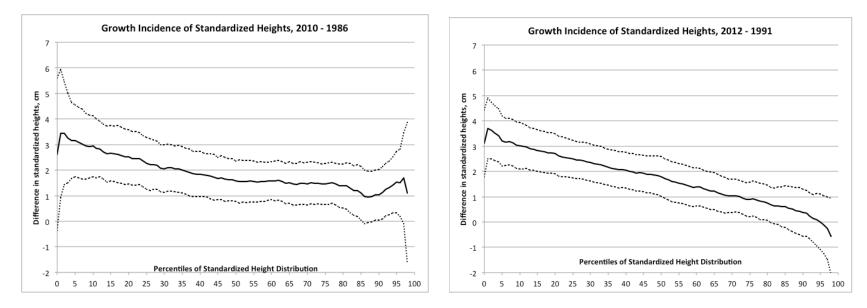


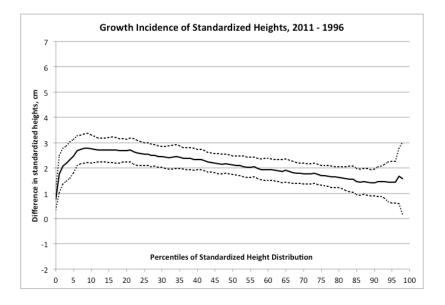
Figure 6 – Figure Health Improvement Incidence Curves cont.

Colombia



Peru

Bangladesh



APPENDIX Table A1. Survey Data

COUNTRY SURVEY	
Bangladesh	
DHS Surveys	http://dhsprogram.com/what-we-do/survey/survey-display-349.cfm
	http://dhsprogram.com/what-we-do/survey/survey-display-349.cfm
2011–12 Bangladesh	http://thedata.harvard.edu/dvn/dv/IFPRI/faces/study/StudyPage.xhtml?
Integrated Household	globalId=hdl:1902.1/21266
Survey (BIHS)	
<u>Colombia</u>	
DHS Surveys	http://dhsprogram.com/what-we-do/survey/survey-display-4.cfm
	http://dhsprogram.com/what-we-do/survey/survey-display-381.cfm
2001 Encuesta	
Continua de Hogares	http://formularios.dane.gov.co/Anda_4_1/index.php/catalog/185
Peru	
DHS Surveys	http://dhsprogram.com/what-we-do/survey/survey-display-44.cfm
	http://dhsprogram.com/what-we-do/survey/survey-display-434.cfm
2001 Encuesta	<u>http://disprogram.com/what-we-do/survey/survey-dispray-454.crm</u>
Nacional de Hogares	http://www.inei.gob.pe/estadisticas/encuestas/
Malawi	
DHS Surveys	http://www.measuredhs.com/publications/publication-fr49-dhs-final-
	reports.cfm and http://www.measuredhs.com/what-we-
	do/survey/survey-display-52.cfm
	(1992 Malawi DHS
	continued

COUNTRY SURVEY continued

Malawi cont.

DHS Surveys cont.

http://www.measuredhs.com/publications/publication-fr247-dhs-final-
reports.cfm and http://www.measuredhs.com/what-we-
do/survey/survey-display-333.cfm
(2010 Malawi DHS)

http://go.worldbank.org/JR84NBDS70

Uganda

 DHS Surveys
 http://www.measuredhs.com/publications/publication-FR41-DHS-Final-Reports.cfm and http://www.measuredhs.com/what-wedo/survey/survey-display-27.cfm (1998 Uganda DHS)

> http://www.measuredhs.com/publications/publication-fr264-dhs-finalreports.cfm and http://www.measuredhs.com/data/dataset/Uganda_Standard-DHS_2011.cfm?flag=0 (2011 Uganda DHS)

1992 Income and	http://iresearch.worldbank.org/PovcalNet/doc/UGA.htm
Expenditure Survey	

1999 Nationalhttp://go.worldbank.org/S233P3YC30Household Survey

continued

Madagascar	
DHS Surveys	http://www.measuredhs.com/publications/publication-fr236-dhs-final- reports.cfm and http://www.measuredhs.com/what-we- do/survey/survey-display-296.cfm (2008 Madagascar DHS)
	http://www.measuredhs.com/publications/publication-fr50-dhs-final- reports.cfm and http://www.measuredhs.com/what-we- do/survey/survey-display-49.cfm (1992 Madagascar DHS)
<u>EPM Surveys</u> (Enquêtes périodiques auprès des Ménages) 1993	http://www.gripweb.org/gripweb/sites/default/files/databases_info_sys tems/Madagascar EPM 1993.pdf
Cameroon	
<u>DHS Surveys</u>	http://www.measuredhs.com/publications/publication-fr260-dhs-final- reports.cfm and http://www.measuredhs.com/what-we- do/survey/survey-display-337.cfm (2011 Cameroon DHS)
	http://www.measuredhs.com/publications/publication-fr7-dhs-final- reports.cfm and http://www.measuredhs.com/what-we- do/survey/survey-display-38.cfm (1991 Cameroon DHS)
Deuxieme Enquete Cameroun auprès des ménages ECAM2 (2001)	http://www.social- protection.org/gimi/gess/ShowRessource.action?ressource.ressourceId =14548

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