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SOUTH ASIAN UNIVERSITY
FACULTY OF ECONOMICS

Seminar

***How misleading is self-reported morbidity?
Revisiting Amartya Sen's 'positional objectivity'***

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Venue: FSI Hall, Akbar Bhawan
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All are Welcome

Abstract

That the concept of morbidity and its measurement are plagued by conceptual and methodological difficulties has been recognised by scholars for quite some time now (Chen and Murray, 1992). Significant progress has been made on devising alternative indicators of morbidity and health status, as well as on developing sophisticated data collection tools and techniques. As different indicators seem to capture different aspects of morbidity and health, any attempt to empirically establish generalizable connections between morbidity and some quantifiable aspects of the society and economy is fraught with difficult challenges. Yet, generalisations have been attempted. Even when the empirical basis of certain generalisation is not strong enough, it has had powerful influence on the analytical basis of policy thinking ostensibly because of the power of the idea itself. Amartya Sen's questioning of the measures of morbidity based on self-reported data is a case in point (Sen, 1993; 2002). From the observation that the individual's own assessment of his/her health status may be seriously limited by his/her social experience, one is almost naturally drawn to an agreement with Sen that using statistics of self-reported health can be problematic as it 'can thoroughly mislead public policy on health care and medical strategy' (Sen, 2002). Yet, large scale sample survey data on self-reported morbidity have been periodically collected in India by the National Sample Survey organisation (NSSO) for decades. The latest in the series is NSS 71st Round. If Sen's critique of the self-reported morbidity data is to be taken seriously, one would hesitate to draw any conclusion on the pattern of morbidity in India across states and over time. One would then wonder why such data are being collected at all. In this paper, starting with this rather uncomfortable question, we try to explore ways to make sense of self-reported morbidity data, and in the process we revisit Sen's position. The variety of evidence from alternative sets of data, including various rounds of NSS, points toward a need for such a revisit.