

POVERTY AND INEQUALITY (IDEV*3000)

International Development Studies · University of Guelph

Instructor	Dr. Lindsay Robinson (she/her)	Term	Fall 2026
Email	TBD	Office hours	TBD / by appointment

Course Description

Poverty and inequality are not simply conditions to be measured. Histories, institutions, political choices, and unequal relations of power shape them, as do the concepts and methods used to define them. This course examines how poverty and inequality have been understood, represented, measured, experienced, and contested at local and global levels. Students will develop a strong foundation in influential economic approaches to poverty and inequality while placing them in conversation with critical and interdisciplinary perspectives on development, power, gender, colonialism, and social and environmental justice.

The course asks both practical and political questions: What counts as poverty, and who decides? What do poverty measures reveal – and conceal? How do growth, public policy, global political economy, colonial histories, gendered relations, and environmental change distribute life chances? Which interventions alleviate deprivation, which transform its causes, and which may reproduce unequal power? Through readings, discussion, applied exercises, and a group poverty assessment project, students will learn to evaluate competing claims and communicate careful, evidence-based arguments.

Learning Outcomes

By the end of the course, successful students will be able to:

1. Explain and compare major approaches to poverty, inequality, and development, including how they shape the questions asked, evidence considered, and solutions proposed.
2. Interpret and critically evaluate common measures and forms of evidence concerning poverty and inequality, including their assumptions, limitations, and exclusions.
3. Analyze specific cases by connecting local conditions and accounts of lived experience to wider historical, political, economic, social, and environmental structures.
4. Evaluate poverty-reduction policies and development interventions in relation to their effectiveness, distributional consequences, power relations, rights, and potential for structural change.
5. Develop and communicate persuasive, evidence-based analyses in written, oral, and visual forms while using sources responsibly, representing people and communities ethically, and responding constructively to feedback.

Course Approach, Structure, and Weekly Rhythm

Each week centers on a major theme or debate. Tuesday classes will generally introduce the week's central concepts and readings. Thursday classes will build on this foundation through clarification, comparison, and application. Depending on the topic, classes may include discussion, case studies, data interpretation, policy analysis, small-group activities, or assignment workshops.

During selected weeks, students will have the opportunity to submit a short question or comment before Thursday's class as part of the 'Reading Engagement and Participation' assessment. These submissions will help identify challenging concepts and shape class discussion and activities. Students do not need to submit every week, but they must complete five submissions.

Part I: Foundations – Poverty, Inequality, and Development

The opening weeks examine major historical shifts in thinking about poverty and inequality, including early anti-poverty thought, modernization, economic growth, and the post-1950 institutionalization of international development. Ravallion's economic history is placed in conversation with Escobar's account of how poverty and the "Third World" were constituted as objects of expert knowledge and intervention.

Part II: Conceptualizing and Measuring Poverty and Inequality

The second part examines how poverty and inequality are defined, measured, and compared. Students learn to interpret welfare measures, poverty lines, distributional indicators, and multidimensional approaches before considering what these frameworks reveal and obscure. The capabilities approach and critical scholarship on gender, social reproduction, SRHR, colonialism, disability, and intersecting inequalities illuminate forms of deprivation and power that household- and income-based measures may overlook.

Part III: Responses – Policies, Interventions, and Alternatives

The final part evaluates proposed responses to poverty and inequality at local, national, and global levels. It considers the textbook's economy-wide, sectoral, and targeted interventions alongside public services, social protection, basic income, gender equality as "Smart Economics," climate-resilient development, environmental justice, and postdevelopment alternatives. Students will distinguish among immediate poverty relief, redistribution, and structural transformation while examining how different approaches allocate resources, risks, and responsibilities.

Textbook and Reading Materials

The course has two required books:

- Ravallion, Martin. 2016. *The Economics of Poverty: History, Measurement, and Policy*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Escobar, Arturo. 2012 [1995]. *Encountering Development: The Making and Unmaking of the Third World*. 2nd ed. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Additional required readings will be available electronically through CourseLink or the University of Guelph Library.

Assessment Overview

Assessment	Weight	Due date
Reading Engagement and Participation (five submissions, best four count)	10%	Five submissions during Weeks 2-9; due by 11:59 p.m. Wednesday before class
Online Quizzes (four quizzes, all count)	10%	September 25-28; October 16-19; October 30-November 2; November 13-16
Critical Poverty Assessment Poster and Presentation	20%	November 17 and 19 in class
Written Critical Poverty Assessment	25%	Friday, November 27 by 11:59 p.m.
Final Examination	35%	During the University's final examination period
Total	100%	