Household Budgets and Historical Living Standards: Towards Global Comparisons
Measuring historical living standards

In broad lines, 3 approaches:

1) GDP per capita (e.g. Kuznets; Maddison; Van Zanden e.a.)

2) Real wage approach (e.g. Phelps Brown; Allen e.a.; Frankema & Van Waijenburg)

3) Anthropometric history (e.g. Komlos; Baten e.a.; Carson)
Advantages

1) Historical projection of present-day measures
2) Geographical comparability
3) Links up to grand historical explanations for global inequality
Increasingly: global comparisons

E.g. Maddison project
http://www.ggdc.net/maddison/maddison-project/home.htm

Historical prices and wages/Clio-infra
https://www.clio-infra.eu/
Disadvantages

1) GDP: Highly aggregate level (nation state)

2) GDP & Real wages: Not much scope for analyzing distribution effects

3) Real wage approach: issues of representativeness (esp. for non-monetized economies)

4) Anthropometric evidence: issues of representativeness/scattered material
Household budgets as an alternative?

- Allow for social stratification
- Note *actual* expenditure and income, the latter often from different sources (i.e. not only male wages)
- Allows for an integration of labour relations and households’ consumption (‘industrious revolution’)
- Available for many different regions from end of the 19th century.

However...
Household budgets as an alternative?

- Very different quality of information (comparability)
- Surveys often structured according to specific aims of contemporary administrators
- Reliability and representativeness?
- As of yet, not much comparative work
Aim of this workshop

- Inventory of different projects using household budgets for reconstructing historical living standards in comparative perspective (e.g. Gazeley & Newell; Vecchi; Boter & Van Nederveen Meerkerk)

- Discuss opportunities and limitations of this source

- Discuss different methodologies used

- Achieve future collaboration/data sharing
Some issues to discuss...

- **Representativeness of budget studies for living standards** (esp. until 1930s → random sampling? Who has conducted study, with which purpose? Longitudinal analysis difficult → Arroyo Abad: “spotty coverage” data)

- **How to measure the value of subsistence agriculture?** (esp. in ‘Global South’) Market prices? Farmgate prices? Caloric value?

- **Comparability of HH budgets on a global scale?** (already issue within-countries!)

- **Can we join forces?** Standardization and future cooperation? What role can Clio-infra portal play?