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## Sociology of Poverty: Quest for a New Horizon

- S. Aminul Islam\*

*It is the common end of the most diverse destinies, an ocean into which lives derived from the most diverse social strata flow together. No change, no development, no polarization or breakdown of social life occurs without leaving its residuum in the stratum of poverty.*

*Thus, what makes one poor is not the lack of means. The poor person, sociologically speaking, is the individual who receives assistance because of this lack of means.*

Georg Simmel

### Introduction

One of the key factors that led to the emergence of sociology was research into poverty. In both Britain and France the rise of sociology was accompanied by poverty studies. Yet from 1940s sociologists moved away from poverty studies. One path of exit was a change of terminology in which the poor was increasingly replaced by the lower class and from the problems of the poor to the fertile terrain of deviance and crime. Another was a shift of the sociological interest away from the lower to the middle class – an area where research funds were abundant and which was more suitable for survey research that was fast becoming the preferred method in sociology (Roach and Roach 1972). The sociological interest in poverty rekindled during the 1960s when poverty was rediscovered in USA. But after the failure of anti-poverty agenda of 1960s in USA and fall of the modernization paradigm, sociologists gradually retreated from poverty studies as well as from development studies. The field was largely taken over by economists (Jordan, 1996). Most of the sociologists engaged in poverty studies mainly focused on policy research.

Poverty studies have definitely been animated by larger and nobler visions like one provided by Sen. In spite of such efforts, it is apparent that in the absence of a strong tradition of interdisciplinary research the field has remained fragmented. Poverty studies have largely been confined to the rites of headcount, if not headhunting. There does not seem to be an adequate theory of poverty.

The emergence of the perspective of exclusion offers a broad terrain in which adequate sociological theories of deprivation and poverty can be constructed. The current discourse of exclusion represents the social predicament of the North. A great deal of theoretical work is needed before the perspective can be meaningfully deployed in the south. The objective of this paper is to undertake a brief analysis of the current theories of poverty, situate the status of the perspective of exclusion among these theories and indicate how sociological theories of poverty can be developed

### Sociology of poverty

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In 1972 the editors of the Penguin reader on poverty found that sociology of poverty did not exist because there was very little theoretical or conceptual analysis of the phenomenon (Roach and Roach, 1972). Recently one author has forcefully pointed out:

“Not only there has there been no theory of poverty and social exclusion that explains the economics of collective action in exclusive groups; there has really been no theory of poverty and exclusion at all” (Jordan, 1996:81).

### **Present state of theory in poverty**

According to Jordan (1996), there are two broad traditions of poverty discourse in the West that has taken shape and crystallized over a period of more than two hundred years. The first is the Anglo-Saxon liberal tradition and the second is the continental mercantilist tradition. The Anglo-Saxon - liberal tradition focuses on the ‘competitive interaction under scarcity’ (Jordan, 1996:4) and the nature of collective action that it gives rise to. The continental mercantilist tradition has been preoccupied with harnessing human resources for enrichment of the state. The poor are like sheep and cattle to be farmed for the glory of the rich.

More generally Kerbo (1996) has identified four different types of poverty theory.

#### **Social Darwinian theory of poverty**

This is the first theory that emerged within sociology and it tried to explain poverty in terms of the behaviour and attitudes of the poor themselves. The poor were poor because they did not work hard, they squandered money on ‘gambling, drinking and unnecessary luxuries and they had disorder of family life. They had no ambition, no inner call for work, were fatalistic, and suffered from “an intractable ineducability” as the Brock Committee phrased it (cited in Matza, 1966:294). Even a whole nation was conceived in these terms.

“All the faculties of his soul that despotism has touched are blighted; the wounds there are large and deep. All this part of him is vice, whether it be cowardice, indolence, knavery or cruelty; half of the Irishman is a slave” (Beaumont, a French observer, cited in Matza, 1966:300).

Everywhere the poor made up the “dangerous classes” living in “regions of squalid want and wicked woe”(cited in Matza, 1966:302). Both Malthus and Herbert Spencer thought that only hunger could teach the poor civility and subjection (Townsend).

A more recent proponent of this view has been the US new right. George Gilder, Murray and Richard Herrnstein have argued that the poor are genetically blueprinted to be at the bottom of the social hierarchy. The poor are poor because they have low IQ and low mental capacity and biologically destined to be poor. The welfare system that underwrites this human substratum of deviance is a sheer wastage of resources and should be dismantled (Kerbo, 1996).

#### **Culture of poverty**

The second theory is the theory of culture of poverty developed by Oscar Lewis, an anthropologist in 1959. Lewis developed his theory from his experience of Mexico. The culture of poverty is a specific syndrome that grows up in some situations. It requires an economic setting of cash economy, a high rate of unemployment and under employment, low wages and people with low skills. In the absence of voluntary or state support and stable family, the low-income population tends to develop the culture of poverty against the dominant ideology of accumulation of the middle class. The poor realize that they have a marginal position within a highly stratified and individualistic capitalistic society, which does not offer them any prospect for upward mobility. In order to survive the poor have to develop their own institutions and agencies because the larger society tends to ignore and bypass them. Thus the poor come to embody a common set of values, norms and pattern of behaviour, which is different from the general culture as such. In

short the poor has a way of life – a specific subculture. Lewis found 70 traits that underlay this subculture. He classified these traits into four types.

- *Relationships between the subculture and the larger society*  
People either disengage or maintain distance from the larger society. They do not belong to labour unions or political parties, go to banks or hospitals or enjoy leisure facilities of the city. They have a high mistrust of the dominant institutions of society.
- *Nature of the slum community*  
The slum community is characterized by poor housing and overcrowding and a minimum of organizational structure beyond the space of family. These institutions grow up mainly to meet their minimum needs. The slum economy is inward looking. It is embedded in pawning of personal goods, informal credit and use of second hand goods.
- *Nature of the family*: bilateral kinship system, unstable marriage, matrifocal family,
- *Attitudes, values and personality of the individual*: The individual has 'a strong feeling of fatalism, helplessness, dependence and inferiority'; a weak ego tuned to the gratification in the present and a strong preoccupation with masculinity.

Once the subculture is formed it tends to be perpetuated. It is transmitted from one generation to another through socialization

The theory of culture of poverty has been greatly misunderstood and misused. Lewis saw it as an extreme form of adaptation that the poor are forced to make under certain circumstances and in certain places. The poor rejects the dominant culture and its institutions because they do not serve them. Their own subculture grows out of despair and protest.

The theory has been found particularly influential in the study of the underclass. In 1962 Gunnar Myrdal (1962) coined the term underclass to identify the Americans who were at the bottom of labour market-unemployed or underemployed and were thus excluded from the mainstream of social life. In recent years the underclass has become an increasingly important island of humanity in the West living off welfare or crime. Charles Murray (1984), a New Right theorist has argued that welfare dependency has led to the breakdown of the nuclear family and formation of a counter culture that encourages dependency and criminality.

### **Situational Theory of poverty**

The situational theory of poverty holds that the poor behave differently because they do not have the resources and opportunities for adopting the middle class life styles. Young people have few opportunities to go to college and so they drop out. Women prefer matrifocal family because it allows them to have greater claim upon their children.

The situational theory gives importance to the structural conditions that give rise to poverty, but it also tends to focus upon the individual responses to the objective situation of poverty. It differs from the culture of poverty theory in a fundamental sense. It does not assume the pre-existence of a subculture that gives coherence and solidity to the behaviour of the poor. The situational theory holds that individuals rationally follow a pattern of behaviour, which is suitable for the objective situation of their life. It has been argued from this perspective that the poor do not follow middle class values because they know that they cannot achieve it. So in practice they tolerate large deviations from middle class aspirations. This has been described as the lower class 'value stretch' (Rodman, 1963; Della Fave, 1974).

### **Structural theory of poverty**

Structural theories of poverty hold that poverty is caused by the structure of the larger socio-economic order. It is the macro structure of society that produces inequality and consequently

poverty. The structure of global capitalism, for example, gives rise to inequality and large-scale poverty all over the world.

Marxism of different varieties has remained a major theoretical perspective for understanding poverty. Dependency theory, which emerged in Latin America, has been particularly concerned with third world poverty. Theory of marginalization again of Latin American vintage has a rich tradition of exploring the fate of human deprivation and marginality. Another key phrase that has become immensely popular in recent years is social exclusion (Friedman, 1996).

The term social exclusion was coined in France by Rene Lenoir in 1974 (Gore, 1995; Silver, 1995; Haan, 1998). But it is to be pointed out that Georg Simmel (1858-1918), a German sociologist outlined a sociological perspective on social exclusion and inclusion as early as 1908 that may even be superior to current discourse on social exclusion. "This perspective is still topical, and it can be argued that in some respects Simmel's analysis is superior to later treatments of such processes" (Hvinden,). In Renoir's view exclusion referred to people who were excluded from employment-based social security system. It became a popular term in France in 1980s to express new forms of poverty associated with technological change and economic restructuring--unemployment, ghettoisation, disruptions of family. It did not replace poverty as a concept but referred to the broader process of social disintegration – an increasing rupture of bond between the individual and society. In the World Summit held in Copenhagen in 1995 the term was officially adopted. In this conference social exclusion was seen as a major problem alongside poverty. The term achieved a conceptual stretch through the research of International Institute of Labour Studies, which found that the new term was useful for four reasons (Clert, 1999).

- First, it allowed broadening the conventional poverty analysis. It could include civil and political rights.
- Secondly, it provided scope for focusing on 'situations of social disadvantage and the mechanisms which lead to them' (cited in Clert, 1999: 177).
- Thirdly it stressed upon the role of actors in exclusion and inclusion.
- Finally, social exclusion was viewed as a property of the institutional framework and processes that underlay exclusion (Clert, 1999).
- 

Gradually the concept was adopted by other agencies including the World Bank. The popularization of the concept was also due to the fact that sociologists and anthropologists began to rejoin the field of poverty studies. This shift of discourse has broadened arena of poverty studies in some major ways.

- The shift of discourse has led to the re-emergence of the theme of inequality within and across nations.
- One of its particular concerns has been the adverse impact of globalization.
- A third area has become the heightened concern with political freedom- democracy and citizenship rights
- Fourthly, the term has led to the celebration of cultural diversities and plurality of values.

The perspective has made clear that the identities of the poor based on age, sex, ethnicity and disability are socially constructed. Certain groups within society become vulnerable because of discrimination. It has led the study of poverty away from a 'goods-centred' approach to people-centred approach. The first emphasized upon the command over commodities that led to greater utility and welfare. The latter view stressed upon human capabilities and their freedom of choice

The exclusion perspective has increasingly achieved theoretical clarity and sophistication. Gore (1995) argues that the process of exclusion that occurs through the institutions of market, state and civil society can be understood in terms of four determinants.

1. The first is the rapid transnationalization of economy, modernization of society and decreasing role of the nation state.

2. The second is the change in the supply and distribution of economic, political and cultural assets in the face of unpredictable economic change.
3. The third is social and political structures through which power is exercised and relationships among groups and individuals are defined.
4. The nature of the state and its role in the process of allocation and accumulation

Silver (1996) has shown that the perspective can be best understood in terms of three paradigms—solidarity, specialization and monopoly. The first stems from the philosophy of republicanism underwritten by Rousseau and Durkheim which stresses upon moral integration of society and cultural boundary and the lack of which leads to exclusion. This paradigm has been greatly influenced by sociology, anthropology and cultural studies. It is dominant in France (Haan, 1998).

The second paradigm is known as specialization and grounded in liberalism and in the philosophy of Locke and Madison, which emphasizes interdependence of specialized spheres of society in terms of exchange of goods and services. One inevitable consequence of liberalism is discrimination and the creation of the underclass. This paradigm is associated with neo-classical economics, theories of political pluralism and mainstream sociology, especially rational/public choice theories. It is particularly influential in USA.

The monopoly paradigm draws on, Weber, Marx and Marshal and views the social order as coercive. The mechanisms of class, status and political power as enunciated by Weber tend to create inequality and formation of monopoly groups, which perpetuate their power and privileges through social closure and labour market segregation. This social closure can be reversed through enlargement of social democracy and citizenship rights. It is dominant in Britain.

It is to be admitted that the approach has faced serious criticisms. The term has been viewed as too broad and vague and thus useless for scientific analysis. More importantly, a key issue has been its relevance for the study of third world poverty.

Yet the advantages of the social exclusion approach are obvious. Haan (1998) argues that social exclusion has many advantages over other related terms. It gives us a broader view of deprivation focusing upon societal mechanisms, institutions and strategic actors causing it. Thus it can be used to link up macro and micro processes. Rodgers (1996) holds that the term social exclusion offers a multi-dimensional and multi-disciplinary view of poverty. It allows us to view poverty as a process. The impact of exclusion can be seen at various levels. It can illuminate the relationship between structure and agency. It has been held that the perspective of social exclusion can be deployed fruitfully in the South for a coherent analysis of poverty and blueprinting consistent anti-poverty policy measures. Most importantly, it allows the scope for a more relational and comprehensive analysis of poverty.

It can be argued at the same time that this perspective allows for the development of a sociologically grounded analysis of poverty. It makes it possible to look into the causes, processes and consequences of poverty as well as the way the discourse of poverty is constructed and deprived people react in a variety of ways to the existing situation of their life. The sociology of poverty by focusing on the institutional mechanism of inequality provides a deeper analysis of material and discursive aspects of poverty, the way poor are constructed as a social category and the way stigma is associated with it. It can powerfully interconnect structure, discourse and agency and show that poverty is largely a social construction along with countervailing action. In recent years we have begun to hear the voices of the poor. But we need to know more about the way the historical destiny of deprived people are created materially and symbolically and how they live with and struggle against their socially constructed fate. It demands the development of a proper sociological perspective on poverty.

## Poverty discourse in Bangladesh

Poverty discourse in Bangladesh has been mainly concerned with income poverty and counting of the poor. It has looked into poverty trends over time and determinants of poverty. In recent years there has been some efforts to broaden the discourse in terms of its interface with human development. The social and cultural aspects of poverty has received attention in recent studies of poverty undertaken by PPRC and Proshika. But in many ways the discourse is limited and constricted. There is a need to further broaden the discourse.

I had conducted a study of two villages in 2001 through the technique of rapid rural appraisal through the support of the PPRC research team. It was aimed at exploring the changing pattern of livelihoods and poverty.

These two villages provided two different patterns of exclusion. The section below encapsulates some aspects of exclusion in these villages.

### Haorpur

This village was situated in the haor area of Sunamganj. The geographical exclusion was quite pronounced. The village could be reached from the Upazila headquarters by crossing a river and walking about 5 kilometres of dirt road in the dry season. During the monsoon the boat was the only means of communication. The village had a precarious agricultural regime –a combination of monocrop and fish subject to the high vulnerability of flash flood.

The critical area of exclusion was governance failure. The chairman of the union parishad, a wealthy man who had returned after years in England had built a huge mansion in the middle of the haor. He had collected around him a retinue of strong men and had established his sway completely over the area. He had grabbed the land of the minorities and driven them away from the village. He had no office. It was wherever he was. He was successful in establishing a patrimonial rule in miniature and a regime of fear.

This example provides a critical issue of exclusion vs. inclusion in the context of clientelistic politics, which needs further elaboration and research.

The second aspect of exclusion was bureaucratic dysfunction that led to livelihood failure. The flood control measures of BWDB were often faulty and made the village vulnerable to flash flood. This was especially true for earthwork, which would be started too late and left incomplete. This often results in the total loss of crops in the course of a single day.

Other key areas of exclusion are health and education and developmental support through NGOs. One NGO had begun work here and then had withdrawn. Employment opportunities beyond agriculture are slim. Young people educated from secondary school to college are totally unemployed. Their only hope is some kind of work outside the country. Poverty is stark. People pursue two livelihoods strategies -deepening of mutual self-help mechanism within respective samaj bodies and seasonal labour migration.

Lalmaj in Comilla provides an opposite picture. It is located near a high way in the heart of Green Revolution belt. Here the traditional samaj has been taken over by a credit society led by a local business entrepreneur. This CBO has built up social capital and a new civic community in the village. It has been instrumental in motivating people to have sanitary latrines in most houses in the village. It has set up a high school and was trying to bring gas connection in the village. People have achieved a new sense of dignity and self –help. It was voiced by a widow. 'No one can be poor if he/she has a pair of hands.' Remittances from international migration, intensive agriculture and non-farm work have provided relative prosperity to the village. There is little income poverty. There is community support for the less well off. Thus Lalmaj provides an example of the role of agency in creating social capital and community solidarity.



### **Ratanpur**

It is a village in Shariatpur that has almost all the characteristics of an urban agglomeration. Situated on the bank of mighty Padma, the village has suffered from river erosion and its prime agricultural land has shrunk over the years. As a monocrop area its agricultural resources are few. Its critical resource is its location as a river station for launches and steamers with direct communication links with Dhaka. It has made migration easy even for poor women. Thus migration provides a major livelihoods opportunity for people in the village. International migration has been a major phenomenon for the village. One can even say Ratanpur has a counterpart village in Italy. A part of agricultural labour force has mainly opted for non-farm activities around the local area. The extremely deprived people live in slum like dwellings on the public land. Some of these make shift dwellings sport teacups, cosmetics and photographs of Bangladeshi and Indian film stars. These deprived people are becoming increasingly excluded from the safety nets of the indigenous samaj. The old and infirm are trapped into extreme deprivation. The able – bodied people have income opportunities. There are, of course, spells of hunger during monsoon and flood. The routine charity is decreasing, but charity during ceremonial occasions has increased with increasing wealth of the rich.

The village has a rich heritage of cultural and religious diversities. It is a major center for syncretistic religion. Its local theatre group has a long history possibly over a period of more than 50 years. Its religious shrine is an instance of social capital where people from several districts give free labour during ceremonial occasions.

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## Challenges in Constructing the Sociological Concept of Poverty<sup>1</sup>

- Monirul Islam Khan<sup>2</sup>

The concept of poverty remained loaded with biological and economic connotations for a long time. The well known DCI and CBN methods are the examples of this kind. In the former concept poverty is defined as the shortfall in specific amounts of calorie intake and in the latter the shortfall is in accessing poverty income<sup>3</sup>.

In the words of the critic there are a number of limitations to the use of these concepts. In a recent paper I have dealt extensively with the factors that are responsible for causing variation in the use of the above two concepts<sup>4</sup>. While some criticisms are technical in nature others are axiomatic. In proposing an alternative sociological perspective one has to deal with both of these. We shall discuss a few of these criticisms very briefly before we proceed to the main theme of the paper. In the axiomatic type the critics point out that the nutrition and income concepts give a partial picture of what we understand as the human condition in a more comprehensive manner. Taking food-need, as the main type of need, it is argued, is tantamount to treating the human beings as "livestock". Moreover, there are other important dimensions about human condition that deserve adequate attention. With the introduction of the concept of Human Well-being like HDI and others this has changed. With the arrival of HDI the significance of other variables have come into notice<sup>5</sup>. For example, attention has also gone to health and education. In a broad sense this last issues also belong to the sociological factors so how can we justify the attempt to find out a sociological perspective? The present paper seeks to answer this question.

### What is the basis for calling for sociological perspective:

In a broad sense the economic aspect is a part of sociological domain because we claim that society consists of different institutions including the economic. However, there are some factors considered as the core the discipline of economics as there are a few factors considered as the core of the discipline of sociology. Income is one such core concept of economics (there are others such as production or distribution), while culture or social structure is the core sociological concept. The difference between the sociological and economic approaches to address the issue of poverty, therefore, has other implications. For example, one could obtain a more comprehensive account on the issue of poverty looking at it from a structural position. Poverty profile is not a still photograph but also a part of a process. A food deprived or income deprived person holds a particular position in society, which needs to be clearly defined to obtain a complete profile of poverty. Additional information is also sought not only to increase the

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<sup>3</sup> Brief meaning of the DCI, CBN and other related measures may be found in the following: *The Second Assessment Study of BRAC's Rural Development Programme*, Edited by AMM Husain, 1998, BRAC, Rahman H.Z, Hossain M., & Sen B., *Dynamics of Rural Poverty in Bangladesh*, BIDS, 1996; Sen A. *Poverty and Famine: An Essay on Entitlement and Deprivation*, ELBS edition, 1987; Streeten, P., 'Poverty Concepts and Measurement' in *The Bangladesh Development Studies*, Vol. XVIII, September, No.3, 1990.

<sup>4</sup> Khan MI, 'Broadening of the Concept of Poverty: Consensus and Polemics', Paper presented in the in-country symposium on Poverty and Population on 30.4.04, organized by the Department of Population Science, University of Dhaka.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

knowledge stock but also to shed light on the measures that may be required to reduce poverty. Even in the still photograph there is a part, which point to the total profile. So why focus on only food or income, why not social rights or status of a person because by changing the focus we also change the concept of poverty. The concept loaded with the notion of food requirement stress on the availability of food. On the other hand, if it is conceptualized in terms of lacking human dignity, the stress is on the ways that reduces marginality in society.

Therefore, it requires a further sharpening of the 'desired' profile of a person to build a sociological perspective of poverty. The modern concept of "citizen" could be a point of departure to obtain the desired profile. The meaning of citizenship implies that an individual has access to certain rights such as security of life, security of property, freedom of expression and of course subsistence. Other domains of rights could also be used to explain the meaning of poverty.

One cannot also ignore the relevance of "class" and the stages of social development to explain poverty. If we shift our attention from the issue of biological survival then it will be easier to pay attention to the other types of meaning attached to the condition a person is expected to live in. Membership in a higher class gives a person higher dominance, higher dignity and higher importance not accessed by other classes. The privileged class becomes a model. Social aspiration of an individual is greatly influenced by the existence of such a model class. There are different types of discrimination in different societies and the end of discrimination is considered a desired condition. Accordingly, the reduction of discrimination is often considered as a goal.

#### **A Brief review of the non-economic concepts of poverty:**

1. The name of Oscar Lewis became prominent when he propounded the cause of poverty rooted in the culture of a community<sup>6</sup>. It came to be known as the "Culture of Poverty". It primarily implies a certain kind of worldview and mindset. In this worldview there is no urge and initiative to improve the condition of life. A relevant example could be a beggar. He is used to living on charity, he may not be hard working or interested in doing labor. With such drawbacks poverty is a natural consequence. Laziness is often considered as a factor of poverty in the concept of Oscar Lewis. When the culture is supportive of hard work social condition will automatically improve. However, Oscar Lewis does not pay attention to identifying a parameter that will help to express poverty. His focus is on the general standard of living of a community. In the theory of Oscar Lewis certain condition in culture is referred to as poverty. Not having ambition or dream is an expression of poverty. On the other hand, the consequence of not nurturing a dream is to be in poverty.

The idea of Lewis came under strong attack. According to the critics poverty is not determined by the subjective condition. It also smacks of racism to claim that some culture is inherently unproductive. What matters are the resource endowment, educational level, and opportunities. One cannot create opportunity on her own. If it is there one can take the initiative to get access to it. For example, if there is a school, the children may be sent there. If there is money one can think of making investment. So scope has to be given to get access to money. The critic prioritizes social structure in determining poverty in society. On the other hand whom we call poor are not indifferent to hard work as is claimed by Lewis. Think of a small peasant in rural Bangladesh or an agricultural worker; he works from early morning to dusk with little break. Yet, with a lesser amount of labor the large peasant earns more than him. The difference in the ownership of assets explains the difference in their economic conditions, not the reluctance to work.

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<sup>6</sup> Oscar, L. (1959), *Five Families: Mexican Case Studies in the Culture of Poverty*, New York: Basic Books.

2. In a recent analysis it is said that there is a condition called chronic poverty and the peasant culture may be a factor of the continuity of poverty. The proponent of this view is Geoff Wood<sup>7</sup>. To some extent the argument of Wood has a similarity to that of Chayanov, who long ago propounded the theory of peasant economy<sup>8</sup>. If we briefly recall, it was observed that the capitalistic profit motive does not operate in the logic of peasant economy, they are motivated by other factors, such as increasing need of the family or the necessity of leisure time.

Wood has related peasant culture in the following manner. Long term investment or the desire for future receives less priority in a culture prevalent in peasant community. In a society where the influence of peasant culture is still strong, aspiration for future good may be found weak among the community members. For example, education seeks an investment that does not promise a quick return. It is a long-term investment. If someone does not express any interest for such long-term investment he won't be able to reap the expected benefit. Wood argued that when a poor person prefers spending in consumption to spending in education it implies that the priority is the immediate survival. In Wood's term the poor is a person who can't fight the process of poverty over a long period and prioritizes the immediate survival.

One may not agree with the theory that in peasant culture there is little interest in a long-term investment, which is needed to come out of the poverty trap. Any culture is an outcome of the response of the people to its environment. Meeting the subsistence need may be an important priority in the agenda of a peasant family but there are other factors that significantly influence the economic decision-making. For example, availability of a large surplus is not common or that agricultural goods do not bring return in a consistent manner. There is evidence that even among the peasants many gradually transform into a rich farmer or are inclined to regular market production. Giving emphasis to cultural factor is not new in economic analysis, in the writing of classical sociologist such as Weber this was reflected when he argued that a particular religious ideology created the ground for the emergence of capitalistic spirit.

3. The third view observes that the existing definition on poverty is not respectful of the human values<sup>9</sup>. By giving exclusive emphasis on food in the definition of poverty other important elements are neglected. By confining human needs to food only the concept of poverty is dehumanized. It gives the impression that the objective of human existence is only to survive physically. But there is also the need to live with dignity and respect. There is need for recognition, realization of the human potential. When the entire focus goes to meeting the 'basic need', primarily food, it is branded as the 'livestock concept'. It has the further implication that the above philosophy is mainly geared to the need of a materialist society that requires unhindered supply of human labor. There is an indication of exploitation underlying such an approach. It is the priority of the class commanding the main resources; the dependent class is engaged simply in responding to that priority. Such a view completely reverses the existing notion of 'basic need' and includes a wide range of socio-psychological elements.

4. The lack of power is often identified as the main shortcoming of the poor<sup>10</sup>. Thus empowerment becomes the primary objective of changing the condition of the poor. This view reflects important

<sup>7</sup> Wood, G., (2003) ' Staying Secure, Staying Poor: The "Faustain Bargain", in *World Development Staying Secure, Staying Poor: The "Faustain Bargain", in WORLD DEVELOPMENT*, Vol 31, No. 3, March 2003.

<sup>8</sup> Chayanov AV, (1966), *The Theory of Peasant Economy*, Thorner, Smith & Kerbly (eds.), Irwin.

<sup>9</sup> RIB Conception and Research Ideas of RIB, Inaugural paper, 2002, p-6.

<sup>10</sup> Khan & Howladar, Betteile, Lovell On empowerment see Beteille, A., 'Empowerment', *Economic and Political Weekly*, March 6 – 13, 1999. Khan MI & Howladar SR, *Does Approach Matter in Poverty Reduction – An Empirical Study on Micro-Credit Food Assistance and Employment Programmes in Bangladesh*, APPL : Dhaka, 2003, Lovell, CH, *Breaking the Cycle of Poverty, - The BRAC Strategy*, 1992, UPL : Dhaka.

insight. There are different dimensions of the marginal status in society. It may be there in terms of the position in the power structure, rights to express opinion or accessing the resources. With the empowerment of the marginal people it is possible to reduce or eliminate these factors. The importance of power structure is manifold. Not only does it increase and decrease the position in society but it also helps to protect different rights. It is said that women's deprivation in Bangladesh society is largely related to their subordinate position in power structure. Systematically they have been isolated from the important places in society and confined to the boundary of the household. The isolation is culturally rooted in the norm of *purdah*. Another dimension is the close relation between the command over the economic resource and the place in the power structure. As a result power structure is now primarily serving the interest of those who command economic resources. In the concept of empowerment the change is conceived not only in the increased access to material resources but also to the orbit of power structure. It may also include self-dependence, role in the decision making process and others.

5. The absence of 'agency' or will to establish one's own rights is also seen as a mark of poverty<sup>11</sup>. As we know 'agency' is posed against 'structure'. If by structure we mean something imposing from above 'agency' is the means for change. In a class divided society it is not possible for the poor to use own 'agency' to rise against the 'structure' that account for their deprivation. There is a need for social mobilization. Through mobilization it is possible for the poor to establish their rights. Thus in a simple categorization following the logic of mobilization the poor are those who accept the dictate of the structure generating deprivation passively and the non-poor are those who challenge the deprivation.

#### **Issue of measurement in poverty analysis**

In poverty analysis measurement is an important objective. There are two functions of measurement. In assessing the level of development and tracking change in the socioeconomic situation. The proportion of poor is counted by using the head count ratio. The measurement is carried out by using calorie intake or income. It is also noted that further sophistication has been made to capture the heterogeneity among the poor as articulated in the concept of FGT index. At the same time, it is found that a great amount of arbitrariness is involved in the above concepts. Derived generalization is, in a way, more apparent than real. We are not dealing with these much talked about limitations in detail as they have been reported elsewhere.

It is important to remember that the social profile of an individual is much wider than generally perceived in the conventional concept of poverty. Also that health and literacy have now been included in the concept of development index. However, our social condition is formed by a number of descriptive categories, not amenable to quantitative expression on easy terms. For example, awareness level on the issue of poverty is a subjective matter, difficult to measure in terms of statistical scale. In the same manner sense of dignity, motivation to end the process of deprivation are all qualitative issues. If a social profile of a poor comprises of the necessary dimensions noted above a greater insight can be obtained.

#### **Outline of a matrix on sociological profile of poverty: Agency Poor and Resource Poor**

We have assembled here a number of theories and views to illustrate the alternative perspective to define the issues of poverty and empowerment. Innovation and uniqueness of what we

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<sup>11</sup> Khan MI, 2004, Op.Cit, Field experience with Nijera Kori, and the strategy of PROSHIKA, Nijera Kori, SAMATA.

discussed in terms of the relevant concepts are found at the axiomatic level. The strength of the concept is not in developing a measurable indicator as much as is in opening a new horizon of assessment. There has been little dispute that the construction of social profile in the context of poverty needs to consider multiple aspects, going beyond the subsistence priority. The issue of physical subsistence is certainly important, but other priorities are equally important both as an end and means to an end. A simple observation may be recounted here; when we prepare our social profile, we pay attention to various things, such as lineage background, parent's occupation or social status. But while we seek to identify the need of the 'poor' we remain confined to the food status only. This is too narrow an approach and not compatible with the profile of a dignified man.

With this brief background a matrix has been proposed to verify the poverty status in the community. It involves both the quantitative and qualitative components of the social profile. Even if they are not as quantifiable as income or calorie intake they are at least empirically verifiable. It is now well recognized that every aspect of our social profile is not quantifiable and need not be so. For example, in rural Bangladesh lineage background is an important component of social capital, which is a descriptive category. The matrix can be used at the individual household level, the way we often administer the survey questionnaire (e.g., we use a senior member as the proxy).

Valuable asset may include cultivable land (not homestead land). Own income may come from selling labor, trade, service and others engaged in exchange relationship. The activities of the rights based group may include mobilizing the deprived people and demand access to different services and resources from the public institution. Social deprivation may not be passively accepted, the victims may be critical of it while the others may take initiative to reduce its effect. To be critical is the evidence of social awareness changing the self-dignity of a person called as a poor person.

Matrix to review poverty status:

Non-material aspect	Material aspect
Depend on own income	Not owning valuable asset
Member of a rights based group	
Critical about unequal social structure	

With the above parameters we may go on individual terms and identify the proportion of those deprived of material aspect. Similarly, the ranking may be done on the basis of non-material aspects. Construction of composite index is possible. We may divide the categories of marginal people in terms of poverty status on the basis of two sets of variables as 'agency poor' and the 'resource poor'. The reference point for the first category would be variables that we considered as non-material aspect and the second the material aspect related variables.

## The politics of poverty

- David Everatt\*

### Introduction

In the 1998 parliamentary debate on reconciliation and nation-building, then deputy president Thabo Mbeki famously argued that South Africa comprised two 'nations' divided by poverty:

*One of these nations is white, relatively prosperous, regardless of gender or geographic dispersal. It has ready access to a developed economic, physical, educational, communication and other infrastructure ... The second and larger nation of South Africa is black and poor, with the worst affected being women in the rural areas, the black rural population in general and the disabled. This nation lives under conditions of a grossly underdeveloped economic, physical, educational, communication and other infrastructure. It has virtually no possibility to exercise what in reality amounts to a theoretical right to equal opportunity.*<sup>12</sup>

Eradicating poverty was fundamental to transformation, Mbeki argued. To a chorus of unhappiness from opposition parties, he reached a bleakly pessimistic conclusion: '[W]e are not one nation, but two nations. And neither are we becoming one nation'.<sup>13</sup>

The issue re-emerged in 2003, when the South African Human Rights Commission released a report critical of government's performance regarding socio-economic rights, following the publication of a number of studies which concluded that poverty levels in South Africa had remained constant or worsened since the advent of democracy. Opposition parties took up the refrain: 'Life is no better now than in 1994'. The African National Congress (ANC) responded furiously, reminding its critics of the massive political changes in the country and the restoration of dignity to black South Africans, as well as of government's not inconsiderable achievements in providing infrastructure<sup>14</sup> – all of which are key elements in contemporary definitions of poverty, if conveniently forgotten by critics attempting to score political points rather than make substantive ones.

Politicking aside, the exchange between the ANC and opposition parties in 2003 was notable in the way it skirted inequality and redistribution. Thabo Mbeki's 'two nations' speech had been similarly silent on inequality while loud on poverty. Both poverty and inequality are South African hallmarks, but this essay argues that inequality poses the most serious threat to the democratic project. Government is caught in the unenviable position of balancing the needs of market stability (in a world dominated by free market economics) and appeasing domestic and international capital with trying to undo the damage of 400 years of colonialism.

While government, opposition and business may all be wary of issues relating to inequality and redistribution, why did Mbeki's seemingly self-evident assertion that blacks are overwhelmingly poor and whites overwhelmingly wealthy generate angry debate? Moreover, how is it that 'the distribution of income appears to have become more unequal between 1991 and 1996'<sup>15</sup> and both poverty and inequality seem to have worsened under an ANC government? This essay suggests some possible answers. It begins by reviewing the status of poverty and inequality in South Africa before turning to the political contestation over how to lessen both. While the political debates are heated and intense, this essay argues that they are (at least partly) fuelled by a more prosaic consideration, namely the fact that 'poverty' has many meanings within government and

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<sup>12</sup> T. Mbeki, *Africa: The time has come*, (Cape Town, Tafelberg/Mafube, 1998), p.72.

<sup>13</sup> Mbeki, *Africa*, p.72.

<sup>14</sup> *ANC today*, 3:14 (April 2003), (see <http://www.anc.org.za>).

<sup>15</sup> *Transforming the present: Protecting the future*, (Pretoria, Department of Social Development, 2002), report of the Committee of Inquiry into a Comprehensive System of Social Security for South Africa, p.16.



the progressive movement more broadly, as it does among academics and commentators. The impact of definitional imprecision has been and remains considerable, affecting development programmes while fuelling ill-tempered, if ultimately rather hollow, debate.

### What do the numbers tell us?

Thabo Mbeki's 'two nations' speech generated controversy in and beyond Parliament as critics and supporters clashed over whether or not he was 'raking up the past' or 'playing the race card'. Although political opponents and some commentators have sought to disregard the 'two nations' thesis as 'racial rhetoric',<sup>16</sup> factually, Mbeki was (and remains) quite right: poverty is a defining characteristic of South Africa, and has clear racial, gender and spatial dimensions. Across the myriad definitions used to measure poverty, there is one common finding: 'the majority of black South Africans exist below any acceptable minimum poverty line'.<sup>17</sup>

In South Africa, one in ten Africans are malnourished. One in four African children are stunted. Just less than half the population (45 per cent) lives on less than US\$2 a day.<sup>18</sup> Lines dividing the poor from the non-poor give different results depending on where they are drawn, but most suggest that 45–55 per cent of all South Africans live in conditions of poverty – some 18–24 million people.<sup>19</sup>

In October 1999, there were an estimated 26.3 million people in South Africa who were aged between 15 and 65 – the cohort considered to be potentially economically active in any given population. Applying the expanded definition of unemployment,<sup>20</sup> South Africa's rate of unemployment was 36 per cent. This was far higher for African females (52 per cent) than any other group. Comparing employment data from 1996 and 1999, the rate of unemployment increased from 34 per cent to 36 per cent. Furthermore, while the actual number of people employed during this time grew from 9.1 million to 10.0 million (an increase of 14 per cent), the number of unemployed people also grew – by 26 per cent, from 4.7 million to 5.9 million. In 1999, 22 per cent of households reported that members were going hungry due to lack of money to buy food. Measured by household income, 83 per cent of households in the bottom fifth have no people in employment. Looked at from another angle, 38 per cent of African households in 1999 contained no employed people – up from 32 per cent in 1996.<sup>21</sup>

Poverty has a spatial dimension: just less than half of the South African population lives in rural areas, as does 72 per cent of South Africa's poor. Poverty is also gendered: the poverty rate among female-headed households (60 per cent) is double that of male-headed households.<sup>22</sup> As Mbeki noted, poverty has a stark racial dimension: 61 per cent of Africans were poor in 1996 compared with just 1 per cent of whites.<sup>23</sup>

Social transfers are hugely inadequate: some 60 per cent of the poor, or 11 million people, are without any social security transfers. Uptake of existing measures is also poor, dropping from 85 per cent for the state old age pension to just 20 per cent for the child support grant; average uptake across all social grants stands at 43 per cent. A 2002 enquiry noted that the existing social security system 'has the capacity to close 36.6 per cent of the poverty gap' if all benefits were

<sup>16</sup> J. Seekings and N. Nattrass, 'Class, distribution and redistribution in post-apartheid South Africa', *Transformation*, 50 (2002), p.5.

<sup>17</sup> *Transforming the present*, p.275.

<sup>18</sup> *Transforming the present*, p.276.

<sup>19</sup> *Transforming the present*, p.276.

<sup>20</sup> Statistics South Africa's expanded definition is those people within the economically active population who (a) did not work during the seven days prior to the interview, and (b) want to work and are available to start work within a week of the interview.

<sup>21</sup> Author's analysis of statistics from *October household survey*, (Pretoria, Statistics South Africa, 1996) and *October household survey*, (Pretoria, Statistics South Africa, 1999) and *Transforming the present*.

<sup>22</sup> *Transforming the present*, p.277.

<sup>23</sup> *Transforming the present*, pp.104–105.

distributed to those entitled to them.<sup>24</sup> But even with full uptake, still there would be some 5 million people living in poor households but ineligible for existing benefits.<sup>25</sup>

Current data suggest that at least 15 per cent of all households suffer from chronic as opposed to transitory poverty: that is, they remain in poverty when measured over time (five years, in this instance).<sup>26</sup> Poverty also attacks the most vulnerable: researchers noted in 2000 that 'no matter what indicator we choose, child poverty is extensive and its extent and nature varies across the provinces'.<sup>27</sup> Little seems to have improved from the preceding decade. A 1997 report found that a third of children aged below five lived in the poorest households.<sup>28</sup> Some 60 per cent of South African children live in the poorest 40 per cent of households (measured by income); three-quarters of all children living in poverty can be found in rural areas; and 97 per cent of them are African.<sup>29</sup> Worryingly, 'all the indicators of child poverty, with the exception of health indicators, suggest that child poverty is on the increase in South Africa'.<sup>30</sup>

Thabo Mbeki's 'two nations' speech was notably silent on inequality; odd, given that South Africa is among the most unequal societies on earth. Inequalities in income distribution saw the Gini coefficient continue to rise in the 1990s<sup>31</sup> despite the ANC's avowed commitment to redistribution. In 1991, 9 per cent of the richest income decile was African, rising to 22 per cent in 1996; the poorest remain obdurately and overwhelmingly black.<sup>32</sup> Inequality has been 'changing from being race to class based'<sup>33</sup> as a rich black elite has emerged and whites have become proportionately less wealthy. Put another way, only a small proportion of black South Africans is benefiting significantly from the post-apartheid economic dispensation. It seems apparent that reliance on market forces to achieve anything other than gradualist elite redistribution is misplaced.

Poverty can be measured in many (often confusing) ways, and research in South Africa is patchy and uneven. Government has no central planning or monitoring agency, and relies on survey data from Statistics South Africa<sup>34</sup> and *ad hoc* research projects to measure the impact of development programmes on poverty.<sup>35</sup> Nonetheless, it is clear that South Africa has appalling levels of poverty and inequality, which worsened during the 1990s if measured in aggregate economic terms. But such observations must be balanced against the massive advances that have been made, most obviously in securing human rights and political freedoms that are critical in allowing the poor (and others) to have a 'voice' in society. The same is true of infrastructure delivery by the ANC-led government, which has been considerable, and which remains in line with the basic needs approach of the ANC's 1994 election manifesto, the Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP). However government is on far shakier ground regarding redistribution and inequality; its concerns about short-term market stability may be short-sighted if redistributive policies do not rapidly give the poor a return on the peace dividend.

Poverty in South Africa has racial, gender and spatial dimensions, a direct result of the policies of the successive colonial, segregationist and apartheid regimes. Poverty is not a historical phenomenon, part of a past now behind us. Until less than a decade ago, full educational and

<sup>24</sup> *Transforming the present*, p.115.

<sup>25</sup> *Transforming the present*, p.308.

<sup>26</sup> M. Aliber, *An overview study of chronic poverty and development policy in South Africa*, (University of the Western Cape, Programme for Land and Agrarian Studies, 2001), chronic poverty and development policy report series no.1, p.36.

<sup>27</sup> S. Cassiem, H. Perry, M. Sadan and J. Streak, *Child poverty and the budget 2000*, (Cape Town, Institute for a Democratic South Africa, 2000), p.xi.

<sup>28</sup> J. May (ed.), *Poverty and inequality in South Africa*, (mimeo, 1997), second draft report.

<sup>29</sup> Cassiem *et al.*, *Child poverty*, pp.36–37.

<sup>30</sup> Cassiem *et al.*, *Child poverty*, p.xix.

<sup>31</sup> *Transforming the present*, p.16.

<sup>32</sup> *Transforming the present*, p.17 (citing Whiteford and Van Seventer).

<sup>33</sup> A. Adelzadeh, C. Al Villar and C. Mather, *Poverty elimination, employment creation and sustainable livelihoods in South Africa*, (Johannesburg, National Institute for Economic Policy, 1998), p.10, (quoting McGrath).

<sup>34</sup> Statistics South Africa is the agency responsible for collecting national statistical data. Its *October household survey* was an annual tracking instrument that measured the impact of development. Unfortunately it was stopped after 1999 for reasons of cost.

<sup>35</sup> See D. Atkinson and D. Everatt, *A national monitoring framework for South Africa*, (Pretoria, Department of Provincial and Local Government, 2001).

employment opportunities were denied to black South Africans, who lived in areas zoned by race, and marked by limited and poor quality infrastructure, and, in rural areas, unproductive land. Those most affected by poverty today are black, live in rural areas and are more likely to be women or children. These should not be controversial statements; there is evidence not merely in statistical reports, but visible in all the cities, towns, villages and rural areas of South Africa.

Poverty and inequality are the illegitimate twins inherited by democratic South Africa. Both cut to the core of ideological differences within the tripartite alliance,<sup>36</sup> which are frequently more bitterly fought over than the differences between the various political parties in Parliament. Poverty is inseparable from politics in South Africa, whether looking at origins and causes, its current form, or solutions.

### Poverty and politics

The anti-apartheid struggle focused on two key areas: extending rights to black South Africans and alleviating the poverty forced onto them by segregation and apartheid. These intertwined themes were prominent in the RDP:

*an election victory is only a first step. No political democracy can survive and flourish if the mass of our people remain in poverty, without land, without tangible prospects for a better life. Attacking poverty and deprivation must therefore be the first priority of a democratic government.*<sup>37</sup>

In the early 1990s, Nelson Mandela spearheaded a charm offensive that succeeded in winning broad-based domestic support for poverty eradication as set out in the RDP. This was made possible after his 1991 public re-affirmation of the ANC's commitment to nationalisation (as reflected in the Freedom Charter) had been dropped by 1993 in favour of a 'mixed economy' that lay somewhere between a 'commandist central planning system' and an 'unfettered free market system'.<sup>38</sup> It was also helped by the blurriness and unthreatening tone of the RDP as a whole, its failure to define poverty eradication other than in infrastructural terms, the near absence in the RDP of redistribution or any detail regarding economic policy other than its desired outcomes.<sup>39</sup> The RDP combined these silences in key areas with rallying calls to action on poverty and human rights. Its 'almost Biblical character'<sup>40</sup> in combination with astute politicking by senior ANC officials, who argued that the RDP 'belonged to everybody',<sup>41</sup> brought into being 'a unique national consensus on the need for prosperity, democracy, human development and the removal of poverty'.<sup>42</sup>

Commentators bicker over how much space to manoeuvre the ANC enjoyed during the early 1990s when it was negotiating the end of apartheid and simultaneously developing its own policies, and how much it has now that it is in power. This is important for those who wish to measure the extent to which the movement did or did not 'sell out' on revolutionary or socialist or other ideals. The mere fact of negotiating a settlement (erratically calling for 'rolling mass action' when it was needed to break a logjam) limited the options of the ANC. So did contextual factors, notably the collapse of the Soviet Union and 'existing socialism', leaving a world dominated by Western powers, economies and orthodoxies. The ANC had to balance the need for market

<sup>36</sup> Led by the ANC, the alliance includes the Congress of South African Trade Unions (Cosatu) and the South African Communist Party (SACP).

<sup>37</sup> African National Congress, *The Reconstruction and Development Programme*, (Johannesburg, Ravan Press, 1994), p.4.

<sup>38</sup> African National Congress, *Reconstruction and Development Programme*, p.78.

<sup>39</sup> See 'Building the economy', in African National Congress, *Reconstruction and Development Programme*.

<sup>40</sup> Mbeki, *Africa*, p.82.

<sup>41</sup> H. Marais, *South Africa: Limits to change: The political economy of transformation*, (London and Cape Town, Zed Books and University of Cape Town Press, 1998), p.177.

<sup>42</sup> Mbeki, *Africa*, p.82.

stability with the demands of justice. There were limited options available to the ANC and its allies as they 'went through all [the] ... steps of the dance of the pacting elites'.<sup>43</sup>

Many now look back on the RDP as a high-tide mark for progressive forces, as if the RDP drafting process somehow floated beyond the circumscribed sphere of policy-making and negotiations to a space where it could operate with greater flexibility and freedom. The document was the result of fierce horse-trading and compromise within the tripartite alliance (it went through six drafts before being released publicly) – let alone the external pressure of trying to appease domestic and international capital – and had many critical weaknesses. One of these was the failure to settle on a clear definition of poverty – despite the priority status given to the fight against poverty by then President Nelson Mandela in his inauguration speech:

*We have at last achieved our political emancipation. We pledge ourselves to liberate all our people from the constraining bondage of poverty, deprivation, suffering, gender and other discrimination.*<sup>44</sup>

Perhaps it is unfair to expect such precision and focus from a liberation movement that had just emerged from decades in exile and which had yet to govern; but the situation has not changed, and poverty is endlessly elaborated but rarely (if ever) defined by government.

Poverty was ascribed to apartheid generally and more specifically to 'the grossly skewed nature of business and industrial development which accompanied it';<sup>45</sup> the response was standard 1970s basic needs provision delivered through a strong central state. Another key weakness saw redistribution – the central thrust of post-colonial governance and fundamental to poverty eradication – obscured by the language of reconstruction, possibly euphemistically and for political-cum-electoral reasons, but with potentially serious long-term consequences. The ANC's electoral dominance has allowed it a long window period in which to introduce fundamental change; but the period for gradualism is finite, after which (this or another) government may be forced to induce far swifter changes.

### **Growth: Policy goal or holy grail?**

In the first flush of post-apartheid democracy, the weaknesses of the RDP were overlooked, and the hopes of left-leaning ANC members were pinned on the centrally located (but politically weak) RDP Office. The RDP promised to deliver in the three areas – 'openness, civil liberties and land distribution'<sup>46</sup> – significant to both growth and equality. The RDP Office set socio-economic delivery targets for line ministries and sought to audit their expenditure plans against RDP targets. While the new ruling party was struggling to manage and transform the machinery of government, various infrastructure provision anti-poverty initiatives were deployed, many of high-quality design and not inconsiderable impact.<sup>47</sup> Social welfare benefits formerly restricted by race were made universally available. School feeding schemes were introduced, alongside advances in access to health care, education and other such services. The 1996 Constitution secured socio-economic rights alongside more traditional civil liberties. In 1996, then President Nelson Mandela could reasonably assert: 'as a government, we have declared war on poverty'.<sup>48</sup>

But 1996 was also the year of betrayal in the eyes of many on the left, as the ANC-led government abolished the RDP Office and adopted the Growth Employment and Redistribution

<sup>43</sup> N. Alexander, *An ordinary country: Issues in the transition from apartheid to democracy in South Africa*. (Pietermaritzburg, University of Natal Press, 2002), p.44.

<sup>44</sup> Quoted in Mbeki, *Africa*, p.81.

<sup>45</sup> African National Congress, *Reconstruction and Development Programme*, p.14.

<sup>46</sup> R. Kanbur and L. Squire, *The evolution of thinking about poverty: Exploring the interactions*, paper presented to the symposium on the Future of Development Economics in Perspective, Dubrovnik, 13–14 May 1999, p.11.

<sup>47</sup> See D. Everatt and S. Zulu, 'Analysing rural development programmes in South Africa 1994–2000', *Development Update*, 3:4 (2001), pp.1–38.

<sup>48</sup> N. Mandela, statement on international day for the eradication of poverty, 17 October 1996, <http://www.anc.org.za/ancdocs/history/mandela>, (accessed 31 July 2001).

(GEAR) strategy. GEAR was a classic neo-liberal formulation, reflecting the assumption that market forces freed of external restraint would maximise not merely growth but also the welfare of citizens. GEAR has been criticised from within the tripartite alliance and civil society more broadly as 'a home-grown version of the World Bank's notorious Structural Adjustment Programmes'.<sup>49</sup> It barely mentioned poverty, and then only in the context of social security and water provision. Despite its progressive-sounding title, GEAR made it clear that economic growth took precedence over other considerations, including poverty alleviation (let alone eradication). This was a reversal of priorities from the short-lived days of the RDP, which had explicitly warned against this approach, arguing: 'Growth ... is commonly seen as the priority that must precede development ... The RDP breaks decisively with this approach'.<sup>50</sup>

'Redistribution' appeared in GEAR's title but was absent from the substance of the strategy, as it had been from the RDP. In GEAR, redistribution was not given programmatic form but was an assumed result of economic growth, a classic 'trickle-down' formulation. The same was true of poverty alleviation, which had to be preceded by (and result from) growth. According to GEAR, economic growth was meant to create a million-plus new jobs: they would be the key vehicle through which redistribution would be achieved. Commenting on GEAR, a contemporary, somewhat timid World Bank-funded report claimed that 'no single blueprint exists for how to simultaneously achieve growth and address poverty and inequality'.<sup>51</sup> Growth may help reduce absolute poverty, it argued, but

*it may or may not lead to a reduction in inequality. In fact, in some cases, depending on the nature and quality of the growth, inequality may increase. There is also evidence that inequality has a negative impact on growth, as well as on poverty reduction.*<sup>52</sup>

Data suggest this is precisely what has occurred (as we saw earlier), fuelling critics who argue that

*a small black elite has ... joined the upper income ranks, but black South Africans – especially those in rural areas – still disproportionately dominate the ranks of the poor and ultra-poor.*<sup>53</sup>

Others are less harsh in their assessment of the impact of infrastructure provision on poor communities, but retain scathing antipathy about 'co-opting individual black wannabes into the charmed circle of the ruling elites'.<sup>54</sup>

Growth in and of itself is no panacea for poverty: it only helps the poor if they share in it.<sup>55</sup> In the event, GEAR failed to trigger significant growth: the 1.3 million new jobs failed to materialise, while over a million formal sector jobs were lost. Its silences regarding poverty alleviation became deafening. Growth has trudged along at an average 2.7 per cent a year since 1994,<sup>56</sup> but remains a holy grail for which the ANC government searches far and wide.

GEAR has been most costly in political terms. It signalled the elevation of growth and fiscal stringency above the socio-economic priorities of the RDP, while seemingly ditching broad-based redistribution in the process. In Marais's words, GEAR 'lit the faces of business leaders but shocked many within the ANC alliance'.<sup>57</sup> Although the publication of GEAR caught both Cosatu and the SACP unawares, both have steadily ratcheted up opposition to it – and the Mbeki presidency more broadly, which is characterised as centralist, overly controlling and conservative.

<sup>49</sup> A. Mngxitama, *South Africa: Country report Social Watch*, (Johannesburg, National Land Committee, 2001), p.1.

<sup>50</sup> African National Congress, *Reconstruction and Development Programme*, p.6.

<sup>51</sup> May, p.57.

<sup>52</sup> May, p.57.

<sup>53</sup> Mngxitama, p.1.

<sup>54</sup> Alexander, p.145.

<sup>55</sup> Kanbur and Squire, p.2.

<sup>56</sup> S. Terreblanche, *A history of inequality in South Africa, 1652–2002*, (Pietermaritzburg, University of Natal Press and KMM Review Publishing, 2002), p.427.

<sup>57</sup> H. Marais, *South Africa: Limits to change*, p.161.

But GEAR also provided an opportunity for Thabo Mbeki to stamp his authority on the tripartite alliance, consolidate his leadership, and win support in some quarters for 'taking on' his trade union and communist allies.

Mbeki himself lies at the centre of a culture of suspicion and hostility that has been nurtured by commentators and some journalists.<sup>58</sup> A number of critics who regard themselves as being to the left of the ANC demonise Mbeki and his 'systematic dishonesty',<sup>59</sup> which they extend to his key ministers and advisers. As a result, Mbeki's own words are disregarded by former sympathisers, who see ANC policy shifts in negative terms and seem unwilling to accept any other motive than mendacity. As if the damnation of former friends were not enough, a former adviser to the apartheid presidency recently weighed in with a 500-page tome that accused 'a new "distributive coalition" ... forged over the past decade between the old white elite and the new black elite' of ensuring that 'a comprehensive redistribution programme on behalf of the poor is not possible'.<sup>60</sup>

### The meaning and status of poverty

But there is more at issue than the symbolic power of GEAR as the centrepiece of opposition hostility or even its apparent failure to significantly address poverty or inequality. GEAR is rarely mentioned by government, and is being allowed to die quietly, away from the spotlight; when mentioned, GEAR is characterised as a dose of unavoidable if bitter medicine, required to raise economic performance to the point where RDP goals can be met by the post-GEAR economy.<sup>61</sup> Neo-liberalism, nonetheless, remains the dominant orthodoxy within government.

But while the tripartite alliance has been involved in its vicious '[b]attle over [the] hearts and minds of the poor'<sup>62</sup>, government has shifted the terms of the debate. Poverty has lost its former near crusade status to black economic empowerment; non-racialism and the 'rainbow nation' have been replaced by a more hard-edged emphasis on race.

Nelson Mandela as president 'sometimes sounded like a philosopher-king';<sup>63</sup> Thabo Mbeki has adopted a far more managerial tone. Where Mandela painted on a large canvas and could move audiences through force of personality, Mbeki is a precisian, slicing up poverty eradication into this or that programme for this or that target group, replacing emotion with detail. Put together with government's endless invocation of 'the poorest of the poor' in support of every policy decision, the ongoing battle over whether government's economic policies cause poverty or are its solution, and capital's purblind attitude to redistribution, it is not surprising to find that poverty has been sanitised of politics.

Poverty's political content has been replaced with the language of 'development', a near-meaningless catch-all phrase that covers an enormous range of activities, from building toilets, to training, to supporting micro-enterprises, and beyond – 'development by piggeries' in the words of one observer.<sup>64</sup> This has happened in large part because poverty was and remains either undefined or repeatedly redefined in ANC policy documents and in the public service; and because redistribution is politically sensitive while stability is at a premium. The ANC is continually treading a tightrope between need and provision.

In a survey of 15 national government departments involved in anti-poverty work, senior managers (directors-general and chief directors) were asked how they and their departments

<sup>58</sup> See for example the unremittingly hostile set of essays in S. Jacobs and R. Calland (eds), *Thabo Mbeki's world: The politics and ideology of the South African president*, (Pietermaritzburg, University of Natal Press, 2002).

<sup>59</sup> P. Bond, *Elite transition: From apartheid to neoliberalism in South Africa*, (London, Pluto Press, 2000), p.119.

<sup>60</sup> Terreblanche, p.436.

<sup>61</sup> Remarks made by the National Treasury's Kuben Naidoo at a seminar at the Centre for Applied Legal Studies, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, 20 March 2003.

<sup>62</sup> Headline in the *Star*, 30 August 2001.

<sup>63</sup> A. Sampson, *Mandela: The authorised biography*, (Johannesburg, Jonathan Ball, 1999), p.505.

<sup>64</sup> Aliber, p.52.

defined poverty. Half (7 of the 15) had no specific definition at all. Some argued that none was needed since everything their departments were doing in the post-apartheid environment could be defined as 'anti-poverty', mimicking the way politicians commonly ascribe their every action to helping the poor. Among the remainder, poverty was variously defined, using a mix of indicators including income levels, female-headed households, spatial location and so on.<sup>65</sup>

Multiple definitions are not inherently problematic, so long as they are all compatible with government's overarching policy goals. (Non-existent definitions are a somewhat greater problem.) But government continues to work without an overarching definition of poverty to animate and cohere those of line departments, a decade after poverty went undefined in the RDP. The ANC government is not alone in this: a scanning exercise among Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) governments concluded that 'most donors and their partners have not developed a consistent conceptual approach to poverty reduction' and as a result 'do not generally have a clear and precise idea of what a pro-poor strategy might look like'.<sup>66</sup>

The situation is not helped by poverty experts, self-styled or other. Since the 1950s, the world has witnessed a five-fold increase in economic output and a doubling of absolute poverty, at the same time as definitions of poverty have proliferated and 'development' has emerged as an international career. Poverty is no longer seen as an execrable result of skewed economic growth compounding global, regional and local discrimination; rather, it is increasingly regarded as an unfortunate but unavoidable by-product of growth. Where fighting poverty was a cause, it has become a profession, populated by (barely distinguishable) consultants from the private and non-profit sectors. 'Development' is merely one among many services provided by government. Poverty has also been obfuscated by the "meaning-of-poverty" industry<sup>67</sup> with competing definitions, indicators, strategies, toolkits and the like, each favourite championed by a gaggle of donors, non-governmental organisations (NGO), activists and academics.

Successive global targets for poverty reduction have been set, missed and revised. As one commentator noted:

*[Q]uite what [these targets] might mean is obscured by the bewildering ambiguity with which the term 'poverty' is used, and by the many different indicators proposed to monitor poverty.*<sup>68</sup>

In the 1960s poverty was defined by income; in the 1970s, relative deprivation and the basic needs approach became dominant; in the 1980s, non-monetary concepts were added, including powerlessness, vulnerability, livelihoods, capabilities and gender. The 1990s saw the use of well-being and 'voice' in defining poverty, while the rights-based approach has dominated the first decade of the new millennium. Each has its own (differing) indicators. Each has its own following among governments and donors, programme managers and NGOs – although few stop to make sure they are talking about the same thing.

Commenting on sustainable development, Wynberg noted that its breadth and lack of specificity allowed the concept

*to be embraced by a wide and often disparate group of organisations, politicians and individuals, all of whom interpret it liberally to reflect their divergent ideologies.*<sup>69</sup>

<sup>65</sup> Atkinson and Everatt, chapter 1.

<sup>66</sup> J.D. Stryker, *Common diagnostic framework for poverty reduction*, (Washington, Associates for International Resources and Development, 2000), p.1.

<sup>67</sup> N. Hossain and M. Moore, *Elites, poverty and development: A background paper for the World Development Report 2000/1 on Poverty*, (University of Sussex, Institute for Development Studies, 1999), p.9.

<sup>68</sup> S. Maxwell, 'The meaning and measurement of poverty', *ODI Poverty Briefing* (1999), <http://www.oneworld.org/odi/briefing/pov3.html>, p.1

The same point could be applied to definitions of poverty. Furthermore, support for this or that approach to poverty commonly becomes a requirement for accessing donor funds and permits entrance to a charmed circle that keeps outsiders away through 'insider-only' jargon and hostility to non-converts.<sup>70</sup>

Maxwell noted a few years ago that a 'small craft industry has developed ... in measuring poverty and deprivation'.<sup>71</sup> Since then it has grown exponentially to become a major trans-national industry (in inverse proportion to poverty reduction, it may be noted). But governments needing help may turn to this industry in vain: experts differ strongly over the value of different definitions and the 'striking[ly]<sup>72</sup> different results they produce. The different results 'would matter less if the same individuals were being identified by all measures',<sup>73</sup> but even this is unclear. Kanbur and Squire have argued that 'broadening the definition of poverty does not change significantly who is counted as poor'<sup>74</sup> (at the aggregate level, anyway). Stryker countered by claiming that poverty definitions have become so broad 'that it is very difficult to separate the poor from the non-poor'.<sup>75</sup> Lipton fulminated against those wanting to replace basic needs targets with 'the language of entitlements, livelihoods and rights', which he described as 'a set of complicated and largely unmeasurable goals'; he regarded the move to do so as 'almost wholly harmful'.<sup>76</sup>

### A question of definition?

The failure to define poverty is not an academic matter: it directly impacts on delivery. If poverty is undefined, programmes lack focus: it is not clear why this or that service is being provided, or to whom, or where, and measuring progress and impact become near-impossible. As Kanbur and Squire summarised it, 'the definition of poverty drives the choice of policies'<sup>77</sup> – or should do, at any rate. An evaluation of South African school feeding schemes instituted after 1994, found differing definitions of nutrition among role-players and a consequent failure to identify or reach the supposed target group – the (undefined) 'poorest of the poor'.<sup>78</sup> Programmes also err in the opposite direction, overloading themselves with principles, objectives, outcomes and the like. An evaluation of government's Community Based Public Works Programme (CBPWP) found the programme had been given successive sets of principles and objectives between 1994 and 2001 and had kept all of them, even though most were undefined and a number were contradictory.<sup>79</sup>

But we should be realistic: politicians and programme managers have opposing needs. The latter require specificity, while the former prioritise political above technical considerations and prefer opacity to a definition of poverty eradication that 'implies ... [that] someone else will have to forego those resources'.<sup>80</sup> Most poverty experts argue strongly that a detailed definition of poverty is a prerequisite for appropriate policy selection, but ignore the political realm and the balancing act it requires. Friedman and Chipkin argue that interventions 'depend crucially on their political feasibility'; in doing so, however, they downplay what they term 'technical' considerations, which include fundamental issues such as the capacity of the state to actually deliver anti-poverty

<sup>69</sup> R. Wynberg, 'Sustaining the nation: Environment, sustainability, and economic development in a democratic South Africa', in G. Maharaj (ed.), *Between unity and diversity: Essays on nation-building in post-apartheid South Africa*, (Cape Town, David Philip, 1999), pp.97–98.

<sup>70</sup> A point conceded by some of the most ardent supporters of different approaches. See, for example, I. Goldman, J. Marumo and A. Toner, *Goodbye to projects? The institutional impacts of a livelihood approach on development interventions*, (University of Bradford, Bradford Centre for International Development, 2002), Department for International Development working paper series no.2.

<sup>71</sup> Maxwell, p.1.

<sup>72</sup> *Measuring poverty*, (Pretoria, Statistics South Africa, 2000), p.2.

<sup>73</sup> Maxwell, p.2.

<sup>74</sup> Kanbur and Squire, p.1.

<sup>75</sup> Stryker, p.2.

<sup>76</sup> M. Lipton, draft notes for keynote address to Dutch foreign ministry/OECD conference, 2000, (see <http://www.worldbank.org>), p.1.

<sup>77</sup> Kanbur and Squire, p.1.

<sup>78</sup> *Transforming the present*, p.283.

<sup>79</sup> D. Everatt, R. Jennings, N. Dube, J. Mulaudzi and M. Ntsime, *Poverty alleviation in rural South Africa: Evaluating the Community Based Public Works Programme 1999/2000/2001*, (Pretoria, Department of Public Works, 2002).

<sup>80</sup> Hossain and Moore, p.8.



services.<sup>81</sup> Hossain and Moore go further, in arguing that 'fuzzy definitions of poverty can be exploited for good purpose' by 'shaming' the local elite into helping their fellow citizens.<sup>82</sup>

Where poverty specialists are insufficiently sensitive to political considerations, political analysts pay inadequate attention to the programmatic needs of anti-poverty interventions. Balancing political and technical considerations is clearly needed. Whether that would be sufficient (assuming it can be done) to return poverty eradication to its status as a national priority is questionable. While poverty has been repeatedly redefined and an unceasing string of indicators and targets provided, in South Africa its meaning has suffered a further hollowing out through endless repetition. Poverty and 'the poorest of the poor' have been both undefined since the days of the RDP and ubiquitous in political discourse. 'The poorest of the poor' are invoked by politicians, civil society activists, the private sector and others as the intended beneficiaries of (and thus justification for) their every action, from the privatisation of state assets to black economic empowerment to enhanced social security provision. The unceasing mantra-like invocation of poverty has drained it of urgency.

It is not that poverty is meaningless: it has too many meanings, in the ANC-led alliance and the public service. The overwhelming majority of black South Africans share an immediate experience of poverty. When ANC policy-makers sit together, they share a reasonable presumption that their common terminology describes a shared experience of poverty. But this may be a wrong assumption, masking differing experiences and definitions of poverty as well as how best it can be eradicated. The point is not to conclude, as others have done, that ANC officials are well-meaning but somehow deluded.<sup>83</sup> Friedman and Chipkin were closer to the mark when they observed that during the struggle era 'local activists ... claimed an almost organic link with "communities"',<sup>84</sup> which in turn were regarded as seamlessly devoid of differentiation. There is an apparent need to interrogate the assumptions that formerly united the anti-apartheid forces and those that inform their current policy choices.

Of course the tendency to avoid scrutinising poverty too closely is compounded by contestation within the tripartite alliance over whether government's economic policy is its cause or the solution for it. ANC documents claim that eradicating poverty remains 'the first priority of the democratic government'<sup>85</sup> – but while government talks the language of delivery, performance measurement and impact monitoring, it has failed to produce a common definition of poverty or a coherent anti-poverty strategy to guide its work and its officials. This is a particularly glaring omission given the emphasis Thabo Mbeki has placed on delivery. The programmatic impact of definitional imprecision has been considerable; as we see below, government's second wave of delivery strategies – the Integrated Sustainable Rural Development Programme (ISRDP) and the Urban Renewal Programme – continue to suffer from a lack of specificity and focus.

### [h1]What has been done?

So, how should the poverty-related actions of the ANC-led government be interpreted? The literature is not of great assistance. Poverty lies at the centre of intense inter- and intra-party contestation. One result is that literature on poverty in South Africa falls into two rarely overlapping categories: the technical and the political. As we saw earlier, this is also true of international literature.

A number of worthy tomes and articles have been published on the challenges and complexities of development in South Africa, whether 'sustainable', 'livelihood-based', 'integrated' or otherwise.

<sup>81</sup> S. Friedman and I. Chipkin, *A poor voice?: The politics of inequality in South Africa*, (Johannesburg, Centre for Policy Studies, 2001), p.5.

<sup>82</sup> Hossain and Moore, p.8 and p.12.

<sup>83</sup> See Alexander, p.151, commending Bond in his *Elite Transition* in this regard.

<sup>84</sup> Friedman and Chipkin, p.27.

<sup>85</sup> African National Congress, 'Social transformation: Fighting poverty and building a better life', in *Umrabulo*, <http://www.anc.org.za/ancedocs/pubs/umrabulo17/umrabulo17.html>, para. 2.

On the other hand, a growing body of literature published by political analysts includes poverty and development, primarily as an offshoot of analysing economic policy and related matters. Most of this literature in turn falls into an anti or pro dichotomy; either poverty is a stick with which to beat government, or delivery data are trotted out to prove how well government is doing. Few if any authors (on either side) combine an analysis of political conditions and considerations with an accurate understanding of the complexities of anti-poverty work on the ground.<sup>86</sup> The result is two parallel discourses, each weakened by the other's absence – the political has become polemic, and the technical has become dry and academic.

Most left-wing commentators start from the position that neo-liberal economics causes poverty and is incapable of eradicating it. This has particular connotations in South Africa, where the Congress Alliance for decades pursued a two-stage revolution, in which the creation of a national bourgeoisie was seen as a necessary precursor to more broad-based revolutionary change. Critics argue that the ANC is only interested in creating a 'black elite' and that it is doing so at the expense of the mass of black South Africans.<sup>87</sup> Arguments by ANC luminaries such as Cyril Ramaphosa, that black businesses would somehow be 'impel[led] ... towards an alliance with the poor' have found little purchase.<sup>88</sup>

Some critics struggle to resist the temptation of ahistorical, rose-tinted hindsight and give the RDP a radicalism it patently lacked. When cholera broke out in KwaZulu-Natal in 2000, it became axiomatic for them that 'GEAR caused cholera'; they were forgetting that user charges, for example, were first introduced by the RDP, not by GEAR. The RDP's silences regarding economic policy are imbued with all sorts of unspecified 'if only ...' possibilities, implicitly blocked by the Mbeki presidency. The two-year lifespan of the RDP Office is presented as a golden moment when progressive forces were in the ascendant, regardless of the chaos and confusion that marked government generally – and the RDP Office in particular – in the immediate post-election years. Thereafter, conservative elements are seen to have wrested control of the ANC, closed the RDP Office, and issued GEAR in pursuit of black bourgeois (read 'self') enrichment.

Those critics who are irredeemably hostile to the ANC often fail to generate analytic frameworks that help us understand the situation or improve it. In part this is because many seem more confused than hostile, and grapple with psychological profiling of ANC leaders, a particularly unrewarding avenue to follow. Alexander for example notes that 'it is relatively easy to explain why an entire political movement such as the ANC found itself compelled to move in the direction of accepting the dominant neo-liberal paradigm'.<sup>89</sup> Having stressed the importance of separating the conjunctural from the personal, Alexander nonetheless cannot resist trying to understand the psychology of Thabo Mbeki and his key ministers to explain the 'strategy behind this volte-face'. He echoes Bond's patronising conclusion<sup>90</sup> that ANC leaders – however misguided – 'believe they are "doing good" and ... ultimately, acting for the good of "the people"'.<sup>91</sup>

Stung by hostile criticism from within the tripartite alliance and former allies in civil society, ANC documents rebut any suggestion that the RDP is anything other than alive and well, and slavishly insist that '[a]ttacking poverty and thus bridging the gap between South Africa's "two nations" have been at the centre of all government's policies and programmes since 1994'.<sup>92</sup> Despite being a political party, the ANC adopts a 'technical' tone in its documents; the only concessions it makes relate to co-ordination of existing programmes within government. The ANC has some grounds for feeling harshly treated: critics who hark back to the RDP refuse to accept the very substantial levels of delivery on basic needs achieved since 1994. Government communications

<sup>86</sup> There are of course some notable exceptions, many of whom may be found writing in journals such as *Development Update*.

<sup>87</sup> Mngxitama, p.2.

<sup>88</sup> Cited in Friedman and Chipkin, p.14.

<sup>89</sup> Alexander, p.150.

<sup>90</sup> In Bond's *Elite transition*.

<sup>91</sup> Alexander, p.151.

<sup>92</sup> African National Congress, conference resolution on 'Social Transformation', <http://www.anc.org.za/ancdocs/history/conference50/resolutions>, (accessed on 31 July 2001), para 14.

head Joel Netshitenze conceded that 'poverty at the level of income and assets ... is staggering', but went on to remind critics of the work done since 1994

*in restoring the dignity of the majority; bringing clean water to more than 9.3 million people; making over 3.5 million electricity connections; housing more than 5 million people and so on.*<sup>93</sup>

Despite the way in which Thabo Mbeki is portrayed by critics –compounded on occasion by his personality and predilections, most obviously over HIV/AIDS – he commonly provides more eloquent arguments about the problems of poverty eradication than the movement he leads or its critics, although his words seem increasingly to fall on deaf ears. He has written and spoken about the restricted sphere of movement for all developing countries – also true of the ANC during negotiations and in government. He has described the way in which the rules of the game 'serve the purposes of our rich global neighbours'<sup>94</sup> and the impossibility of autarky; and has made plain his wariness of market forces:

*The new god of our world, the market, is not informed by a tablet of commandments on which is inscribed: Thou shalt banish poverty in the world!*<sup>95</sup>

This should not be misread to mean all criticism is misplaced: the Mbeki era in government and the ANC has been marked by centralism and a seeming dislike of criticism and debate, often accompanied by stinging attacks on enemies both real and imagined. The real concern in many quarters is less about Thabo Mbeki's acerbic tongue than about a more general stifling of debate by his 'henchmen' coupled with attacks on left-wing elements within the ANC and the tripartite alliance more broadly. Given Mbeki's and the ANC's grip on power, the strength of criticism meted out to dissenting supporters seems unnecessary. Cosatu, having described the 'conspiratorial and military' style of a clique of Mbeki-supporting former exiles in the ANC, recently warned:

*There can be no question that the majority of ANC leaders find [their] tactics distasteful. Nonetheless, the influence of this grouping is on the rise. Its divisive tendencies will do more to weaken the democratic movement than any amount of disagreement over economic policies. If members of this group win more power, we can say goodbye to the NDR [National Democratic Revolution], the Alliance, the ANC traditions of openness and serving the poor, and indeed to our democratic victory.*<sup>96</sup>

### What is to be done?

Critics have largely failed to offer any substantial alternative to the current economic policy or development frameworks. Those to the right of the ANC, already suffering the indignity of having their free market thunder stolen by a former ('terrorist') liberation movement, can do little more than call for greater market freedom. Terreblanche – who, we are told, held 'numerous clandestine meetings in Britain' with the then banned ANC and helped 'sell' neo-liberal economics to the movement – tortuously describes South Africa as 'a system of African elite democracy cum capitalist enclivity'.<sup>97</sup> His fear is that in future, interaction between rich and poor 'will be at the level of crime, violence, and contagious diseases, that will be "exported" daily' – not dissimilar from those formerly used to whip up white fears of the 'swart gevaar'. The solution, he argues, is 'a decisive paradigm shift from the *liberal capitalist* ideology of the British-American world towards the *social democratic* ideology of continental Europe'<sup>98</sup> – although we are not told how such a change in *Weltanschauung* might occur.

<sup>93</sup> J. Netshitenze, 'Pushing back the frontiers of poverty is what it's all about', *Pretoria News*, 8 August 2002.

<sup>94</sup> Mbeki, *Africa*, p.280.

<sup>95</sup> Mbeki, *Africa*, p.280.

<sup>96</sup> *Political discussion paper*, (Johannesburg, Congress of South African Trade Unions, 2003), p.16.

<sup>97</sup> Terreblanche, p.422.

<sup>98</sup> Terreblanche, p.439 (emphasis in original).

Thabo Mbeki put free marketeers in their place in early 2003, reminding them that, three years of neo-liberal orthodoxy notwithstanding,

*[w]e do not agree and will not support the proposition ... that we should rely solely and exclusively on the market to solve the problems facing our people. We are not market fundamentalists ...*<sup>99</sup>

The gentleness of his rebuke stands in strong contrast to the sharpness that has characterised his responses to criticism from the left, notably from Cosatu and the SACP.

Those to the left have an intense sense of betrayal but are hazy about what the ANC should do differently. Some mouth general Keynesian utterances about increased social spending on public works campaigns and the like – adopted by the ANC in late 2002 – or simply list the failings of the ANC government. Marais has outlined the global and local constraints facing the ANC government, but his main criticism is government's failure to take risks and move beyond economic orthodoxy – despite having described the power of the South African private sector, its deep sensitivity to anything but free market economics and the restricted space to move left open to government.<sup>100</sup> Bond hopes the progressive forces that helped shape the RDP will 'be drawn towards a much more productive campaign defending and amplifying the RDP of the Left'.<sup>101</sup> Indeed, if civil society were more robust in offering constructive criticism, the ANC may be more inclined to take the risks Marais identified.

Alexander accepts that the ANC had little option but to embrace neo-liberal orthodoxy, but (with Bond) argues that the ANC's key failing is that it 'is placing its faith in the international capitalist class rather than in the social movements of the common people'.<sup>102</sup> While both regard building social movements as a key task, it is not clear what is to be done until social movements regain the power they enjoyed in the struggle era. Moreover, the likelihood of the ANC's left-wing members winning significant concessions is slender, as Friedman and Chipkin have made clear:

*The multiclass nature of the alliance, and the strong pressures from its business and professional elements for racial preference, do ... limit the options of the ANC left.*<sup>103</sup>

Government put 'poverty experts' to shame by producing an articulate, hard-hitting analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of post-1994 poverty eradication in the (awkwardly named) Integrated Sustainable Rural Development Strategy (ISRDS). The ISRDS naturally operated within government's neo-liberal framework and avoided deeper 'political' issues, but offered a critique of government's attempt to make local government the driving force in bottom-up (demand-driven) development. According to the ISRDS, development was 'beset by problems of co-ordination and communication', with the result that assets 'rained apparently randomly from above, with little internal coherence or responsiveness to community priorities'.<sup>104</sup>

The ISRDS is a mechanism for aligning all three spheres of government behind local development priorities. But it has telling weaknesses:

*The ISRDS has not one but many goals, and it is unclear whether government sees the ISRDS spearheading a rural economic growth strategy or forming part of its existing rural anti-poverty strategy (heavily reliant on infrastructure provision).*<sup>105</sup>

<sup>99</sup> T. Mbeki, response to debate on State of the Nation address, 18 February 2003, (see <http://www.gcis.gov.za>).

<sup>100</sup> H. Marais, 'The logic of expediency: Post-apartheid shifts in macroeconomic policy', in Jacobs and Calland, pp.83–104.

<sup>101</sup> Bond, p.121.

<sup>102</sup> Alexander, p.152.

<sup>103</sup> Friedman and Chipkin, p.19.

<sup>104</sup> *The Integrated Sustainable Rural Development Strategy*, (Pretoria, Independent Development Trust, 2001).

<sup>105</sup> D. Everatt, *The nature and purpose of the ISRDP*, (Pretoria, Independent Development Trust, 2002), p.2.

The ISRDS failed to articulate an unambiguous rural economic growth strategy; rather, it mixed economic and social goals, blurring both in the process. This seemed to result from a prevalent attitude in the public and private sectors – that rural areas are inherently and uniformly unviable in economic terms. Seen in this perspective, rural areas need basic infrastructure, and their denizens need welfare support and basic survivalist skills – development as charity, with the purpose of eradicating infrastructural inequalities and assisting survivalist economic enterprises. No more ambitious economic goal is regarded as feasible.

It has become a truism that the South African government lacks ‘an overarching anti-poverty strategy’.<sup>106</sup> The ISRDS fails to fill this glaring gap, with its emphasis on process and prevarication over economic direction. Additional problems highlighted by commentators from across the political spectrum include capacity gaps and the failure of communication and co-ordination.

But the fundamental problem facing the ISRDS – and thus all the development and anti-poverty programmes that government is tasked with co-ordinating – is that it cannot and will not transform rural poverty by itself. It must form part of, and be sustained by, a broader, long-term redistributive government policy and strategy. But redistribution has been conspicuous by its absence, first from the RDP and then from GEAR. Zimbabwe offers a powerful illustration of the importance of delivering substantive post-colonial redistribution.

### Conclusion

Eradicating poverty and inequality in South Africa requires long-term and vigorously pursued redistributive strategies and policy frameworks. Development or anti-poverty programmes by themselves cannot undo the damage of the past; transformation requires that such programmes are embedded in a programme of redistribution. It is of little value training small black farmers in modern agricultural methods if they cannot access land, for example. Redistribution – symbolised by the commitment to nationalisation – lay at the heart of the Freedom Charter, which guided the ANC from 1955 to the late 1980s when it moved away from any form of central control in favour of increasingly unfettered free market capitalism. But ‘the market’ has thus far failed to achieve significant redistribution, while poverty has worsened. The urgency of dramatically enhancing poverty eradication efforts is starkly underlined by HIV/AIDS and the impact it will have on South Africa:

*The [HIV/AIDS] epidemic is deepening poverty, reversing human development achievements, worsening gender inequalities, eroding the ability of governments to maintain essential services, reducing labour productivity and supply, and putting a brake on economic growth.*<sup>107</sup>

As the United Nations Development Programme noted, ‘AIDS is a development crisis’ for which the most effective response ‘is sustained, *equitable* development’.<sup>108</sup>

Poverty eradication was a national priority, and must become one again. For it to be sustainable, government will have to elaborate a broader redistributive framework within which its development activities are located. This would also create space for winning back the support of civil society. South Africa cannot afford any other option.

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<sup>106</sup> Aliber, p.52.

<sup>107</sup> R. Loewenson and A. Whiteside, *HIV/AIDS implications for poverty reduction*, (Geneva, United Nations Development Programme, 2001), policy paper, p.1.

<sup>108</sup> Loewenson and Whiteside, p.23. (emphasis added)

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# World Bank Data of Poverty and Poverty of World Bank Data

- Nazrul Islam\*

## Introduction

This paper, as the name suggests, is in two parts. The first is a revised version of a Speech prepared impromptu as an instant reaction to a news item that appeared in a local daily (*The Independent* April 25, 2004), which quoted the World Bank (WB) as claiming a “Dramatic Decline in Global Poverty”. The Speech was delivered as a Presidential Address at a conference on poverty. With so much poverty all around the news item seemed to be out of place, while my gut feelings told me that there was something wrong somewhere. So I set out to examine the WB data and found that the World Bank first fails to be convincing, as the data does not actually show any significant decrease in poverty in most regions of the world. And second, for China, on whose statistics the claim is mostly based, it is the least convincing of all.

It was also argued that poverty is affected by the continuing growth of inequality in the poor countries. Noting further that the WB by making claims of reducing poverty is in effect drawing attention away from the huge riches that are accumulating in few hands in these poor countries and thereby distorting the picture of poverty, if not lying about it. A participant at the conference was genuinely disturbed and asked to know if reputed organizations like the WB could actually be so deceptive. This forced me to look at the matter more closely and the result is the second part of the essay in which the redundancy of the arguments presented in the first part, including the WB data, are demonstrated.

## Part One

Before I get to these arguments let's first look through the numbers on which the WB bases its claim of dramatic decline of poverty globally. The World Bank claims that poverty has declined *significantly* in the developing countries, that the proportion of people living in extreme poverty on less than one-dollar-a-day dropped by almost half from 1981 to 2001, from 40 percent to 21 percent. In absolute terms, that is, in real number of humans, this means that the number of people living in poverty fell from 1.5 billion or 1500 million in 1981 to 1.1 billion or 1100 million in 2001. The WB then goes on to elaborate on these numbers further by noting that East Asia was the poorest region in the world twenty years ago, which means mostly China, the dramatic growth in that region has pulled more than 500 million people out of poverty. China alone “lifted” about 400 million people out of poverty! (*The Independent* April 25, 2004)

To understand these numbers more clearly let us look closely at the poor regions of the world and see if there has really been a dramatic reduction in poverty in these parts. Latin America (LA) is considered to be somewhere in between the poor countries of Asia and Africa and the

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rich countries of Europe and North America and the number of poor is also considered to be low. To differentiate the poverty in Latin America, which has a higher GDP per capita than the developing countries of Asia and Africa, the WB put the line of poverty at \$60 per month or two-dollars-a-day per person, in place of a one –dollar- a-day per person, corrected by the purchasing power parity (PPP). Thus the WB claims that the proportion of the poor in Latin America has remained at 10 percent in 2001 as it was 20 years ago in 1981 (*The Independent* April 25, 2004).

Is that good news or bad news? It cannot be good news simply because the total population by this time has also increased so that 10 percent of a larger population means a larger number of poor people. In reality Latin America is probably the one of the worst regions of the world in terms of poverty, particularly in relation to the other groups of income earners. Guillermo O'Donnell (1996) calls it a "scandal" and reports that in 1990 about 46 percent of Latin Americans lived in poverty. In 1990 there were 76 million more Latin Americans in poverty than in 1970. Even today in many countries of the region the proportion of population below \$2/day remains high even by WB accounts. In El Salvador the proportion of population below \$2/day is 58%, in Ecuador it is 40.8%, in Honduras it is 44.4% and in many other countries about one third of the population are still below the WB poverty line (WB 2004).

When we follow the national poverty line figures, which is often claimed to be a better indicator (more on this later), the poverty in Latin America, particularly in the rural areas, appears to be far worse. While in most countries the WB figures tend to be higher than those reported by national poverty lines like in Bangladesh the national figure is 35.6 (UNDP 2002) as opposed to the WB \$2/day figure of 82.8 (WB 2004). But in many countries of Latin America the opposite seems to be true. So that in Bolivia WB reports 34.3 percent under \$2/day poverty, the proportion of people below the national poverty line is as high as 63.2% (WB 2004) for the whole country while for the rural areas it is an astonishing 81.7% (in 1999 figures WB 2004). In Columbia WB reports 22.6% while the national poverty line has 60% poor countrywide and 79% (WB 2004) in the rural areas. In Peru it is 53.5% and 67% in countrywide and rural percentages respectively under the national poverty line. The WB puts it at 37.7% (WB 2004). Thus the WB figures are far short of the national poverty lines in many countries, if not the whole region. Also, a very high proportion of the rural population in the region is in wretched poverty by whatever account.

The poor in this region are further affected by the lack of growth in as whatever growth there is, has only made the rich richer and the poor poorer. Jeff Gates (1999) reported in 1999 that among the Latin American and Caribbean countries eighteen are below their per capita income of 10 years ago. Indeed, the growth rate of GDP per capita for this region over the last 25 years has been a mere 0.7%, while some countries have actually seen negative growth during the period (UNDP 2002). For example over the past 25 years the annual growth rate in Peru has been - 0.7% and it reaches as low as -3.5% in Nicaragua (UNDP 2002). And guess who got the worst of the deals. In the later part of the 1970s for which I have data the poorest 20% of the population earned about 5% of the national income in Brazil and about 4% in Paraguay (Islam 1982). But in the year 2000 the poorest 20% earned or consumed only 2.2% in Brazil, and 1.9% in Paraguay or less than half of the earlier meager amounts. If we look at the income of the poorest 10% it is an unbelievable 0.7% in Brazil, 0.8% in Venezuela and 1.3% in Mexico (UNDP 2002).

If we look at the ratio between the incomes of the poorest 10% and the richest 10% of the national income or consumption today we are simply dumbfounded as the rich get 44 *times* that of the poor in Venezuela, 65.8 *times* in Brazil and an astounding 91.1 *times* in Paraguay (UNDP 2002). For a comparison it is 9.5 *times* in India, which is bad enough, and 7.3 *times* in Bangladesh and 6.7 *times* in Pakistan and in most countries of Western Europe less than ten *times* (UNDP2002). So by claiming that the percentage of the poor in Latin America has remained unchanged, WB is merely hiding the real picture of poverty from emerging. Indeed, by any account the lot of the poor has definitely worsened there. As a publication of the

International Monetary Fund puts it: "Not only is poverty widespread in Latin America and the Caribbean, it has increased during the past decade. The unequal distribution of income is generally seen to be at the heart of poverty in the region—the bottom 20 percent of the population receive less than 4 percent of total income" (Burki and Edwards 1995 quoted by Guillermo O'Donnell 1996). The figures are for the 1990s but they have not improved since then.

I do not wish to go through similar exercises for the other regions but I can assure you that the lives of the poor and particularly of the poorest 10% have deteriorated further during the last twenty years. This is actually recognized by the Bank in its own report regarding Sub-Saharan Africa. The poverty there is so stark that no numbers can hide it. In sub-Saharan Africa, twenty nations remain below their per capita incomes of two decades ago (Jeff Gates 1999). Between 1987 and 1998 the number of Africans living in poverty increased by no less than 80 million (Andrew Mack 2002). The World Bank also expected that another 116 million would be added to the ranks of the very poor in the next ten years (Andrew Mack 2002).

The trend definitely continued to the year 2001 as the number of poor people between 1981 and 2001 increased significantly in the Sub-Saharan region. In percentage terms the number of poor has increased from 41 to 47 percent and in real numbers from 164 million to 314 million in a region with a total population of 606 million only. And the depth of poverty is increasing as life expectancy has fallen from 50 to 46 years in just ten years (*The Independent* April 25, 2004). For some countries it is even worse. And as the WB also points out that while in 1980 one out of every ten poor people of the world lived in Sub-Saharan Africa, in the year 2000 the figure rose to *one out of every three*. And projections show that in the future *one out of every two poor people of the world shall be living in Sub-Saharan Africa!* (*The Independent* April 25, 2004.)

So that poverty has not declined either in Latin America or Sub-Saharan Africa after all. How about South Asia then? Let's then look at our own region, regularly reported in the West as the picture perfect poor region, which also includes the "basket case", Bangladesh. World Bank again shyly admits that although the number of poor has decreased, the decrease has not been as remarkable and it is not so visible either as it has been upset by the increase in population. Thus although there was a betterment in the life of about 34 million people (in a population of over 1.4 billion) over the last twenty years, unfortunately people in South Asia have produced more offspring to nullify the gains. So that the number of poor, that is, less than \$1/day in this region today stands at 428 million (*The Independent* April 25, 2004)! Meaning the total population of Bangladesh and about three more such basket cases.

The region also has all other manifestations of poverty already built into it, like large populations, low income, high infant and maternal mortality, low life expectancy, low literacy rate and so on. Also, the lot of the poor has worsened in the past years as the rich have become richer, while the ratio between the income of the rich and the poor has also increased. For Bangladesh the ratio between the top 5% income earners and the bottom 20% in 1970 was 1.9 (Islam 1982), today the difference in income between top 10% and bottom 10% is 7.3 times. Similar increases in inequality are also noted for Pakistan and India.

So then, we are now left with one more and a very interesting region that was not even considered poor before 1990. This is the region of Eastern Europe and Central Asia. This is the region that threw away the shackles of communism around 1990 and has just begun its journey towards capitalism, indeed, inundated itself with market mechanisms. In this region the introduction of capitalism, like in China, must be doing all the good work that it is supposed to do. In fact there was very little recognizable poverty to begin with during the socialist era, so capitalism would require only a little push to make everyone rich forever. Unfortunately the WB is somewhat embarrassed to announce that although there are very few people below one-dollar-a-day in that region, the number of people below \$2/day have *risen* to around 20 percent (*The Independent* April 25, 2004). Meaning where there was no

poverty during socialism, capitalism has successfully introduced at least 20 percent of the population to the curse of poverty!

For matters of comparison the poverty line in this region has actually been set at \$4 per day. UNDP using the \$4 a-day cutting line estimates that as high as one-third of the population (about 120 million people) in the region is in poverty (Yan Hao 2001). In Russia the proportion of population below the \$4 a day is 53% while it is 62% in Kazakhstan. Atal (1999) calls this a transition from "no-poverty to poverty". And it is almost certain that in the next ten years there will be a sizable number of less than \$1/day poor in this region also as all the paraphernalia of poverty are already in place including a very fast deteriorating economy with for example as low as -9.6% annual growth rate in Azerbaijan and -11.8% in Tajikistan and close to the same in other countries of the region (UNDP 2002).

Transition to market economies has already been disastrous for some countries like Russia or Ukraine. Redmond and Hutton (2000) report that in Russia and Ukraine, the two largest transition economies of the region, "there has been a constant and steep decline in real GDP: in 1997 it was estimated to be 46% of its 1989 value in Russia, and 34% in Ukraine" (Redmond and Hutton, 2000). Atal (1999) in his UNESCO publication *Poverty in Transition and Transition in Poverty* notes that poverty in this region has a trend opposite of that noted in traditional poor regions. First, in the traditional poor areas poverty is decreasing while in this region poverty is on the increase by all three indicators of poverty, i.e. the number of poor, the head count index and poverty gap. Second, in developing countries the poor are illiterate, unskilled, unemployed, or from rural areas or socially disadvantaged groups but in Eastern Europe the new poor consist largely of urban dwellers, mostly educated, skilled and still employed, who fall victims of the economic restructuring and crisis, such as the job-dislocated people, those who are paid low wages, those whose wages have been deferred, and pensioners with pensions not properly indexed to inflation. In the case of Russia it is the most unlikely group, the intellectual class, which has suffered the most (Atal in Yan Hao 2001). Although Atal's contention that the number of poor in the traditional poor region is decreasing is not accurate, his description of poverty in this region appears to be quite appropriate.

Thus we see that poverty has actually increased in all regions, and has invaded regions that were not even poor just fifteen years ago. The only success story that the world bank can actually quote is China, which "lifted" 400 million people out of poverty. So, let's look at China now. With an increase of about 22 *times* in its GNP and about 17 *times* in its GDP per capita (Yan Hao 2001) China, alone among the transition economies, has had any success with its economic managements, including its poverty. Indeed, China announced in November 2000 that "absolute poverty" has been eliminated from the country. Gao Hongbin, a leading poverty alleviation official claimed that, "[a]t present, except for some 26 million disabled people or those living in extremely bad natural environment areas, we have succeeded in eliminating absolute poverty in the country," (Agence France Presse 2000). The claim is based on the national poverty line drawn at 635 Yuan (or US \$77) of income annually. Gao Hongbin reasons that 635 Yuan or about 22 US cents a day are enough money to enjoy the basic necessities of life in the rural area (Gao Hongbin quoted by Agence France Presse 2000). Thus according to the Government statistics there is almost no one in China's 1.3 billion people below 635 Yuan per capita income annually (Agence France Presse 2000).

China after 1978 not only began to surge forward with its economic reforms but also executed plans in various phases designed specifically to alleviate poverty, particularly in the rural sector. Yan Hao (2001) notes that by 1999 the per capita income of 870 million rural residents stood at 2210 Yuan or about 75 cents a day from only 134 Yuan in 1978. After 1949 a major land reform, which gave land to the landless poor, lifted the majority of the rural population from absolute poverty. A later experiment by introducing the commune system did some damage to it so that by the end of the seventies there were still about one-third of the

population below the poverty line (Yan Hao 2001). According to the State Statistics Bureau there were about 250 million or 30.7% of the rural population were under the poverty line in 1978. By the end of the 1980s the number came down to about 125 million or 14.8% of rural population with the poverty line drawn at 200 Yuan per year. In 1994, the government “kick-started” the “National 8-7 Poverty Reduction Program” to lift the remaining 80 million rural poor from poverty by the year 2000 and claimed to have done so (or nearly so) by the end of the period in 2000. On a May 2001 conference it was announced that the program has made considerable progress by reducing the number of rural people living below the poverty line to 30 million, or 4% of the rural population (Jiang, 2001 quoted by Yan Hao 2001) However, these 30 million, seemed to be the same group as in the Agence France Presse (2000) report who live “largely in mountainous regions, frontier regions and ethnic minority regions, where natural conditions are harsh and infrastructure is inadequate”. (Yan Hao).

In contrast to the rural scenario the urban economy even from the 1950s was strictly planned so that every city dweller was guaranteed a job, which were often for the whole life with pension benefits. The system was also very egalitarian in the sense that “few lived in luxury and few in absolute poverty”, so that the Gini coefficient remained under 0.2 for over three decades up to 1988 (Zhao and Li 1999 as quoted by Yan Hao 2001). Thus even as late as the 1980s, there were fewer than 1% of the urban residents or about 3 million under the official poverty line. These consisted of the “childless elderly, orphans and the disabled”. Since the opening up of the economy the urban residents saw a great increase in their incomes also. Thus the per capita income rose from 343 *Yuan* in 1978 to 5,425 *Yuan* in 1998. So that in 1999 the poverty line was drawn at : 2646.7 *Yuan* of annual disposable income. Thus both in the rural and urban areas the Chinese seem to have eliminated absolute poverty successfully.

Of course not everyone agrees with this rosy picture in China and some have argued that the opening up of the economy in China has begun to take its toll in the fast growing urban sector. By these accounts the number of poor are inevitably on the rise with some estimates as high as 12 million or 20 million (Zhang 1997 and Hong 1997 respectively, as quoted by Yan Hao 2001). Nevertheless, it is widely agreed that people living in poverty make up less than 5% of the total urban population (Yan Hao 2001), or roughly about 14 million. While on the other hand the Gini coefficient also rose from 0.19 in 1985 to 0.28 in 1995 (Zhao and Li, 1999 as quoted by Yan Hao 2001). Thus the gap between China's richest and poorest is now amongst the widest in Asia, if not the world (Hayes 2003).

The rise in inequality in China is particularly evident from the number of the super rich. By 1999 China could boast of 50 super rich persons, poorest of who was worth \$6 million, which in the US would be equal to \$200 million (Justin Doebele 1999). During the next five years, ending in 2004, the number of the super rich has swelled with at least 3 billionaires in their ranks. Forbes (Website: Forbes 2004) lists 200 of these super rich the poorest of whom is worth about \$80 million. These numbers may seem preposterous in an economy that was socialist only yesterday, but they seem to be in tune with the other transition economies like Russia. Only four Russians made the Forbes world billionaires list in 1997. Today, by the count of *Forbes Russia*, there are 36 Russian billionaires. That the combined net worth of Russia's 36 billionaires (\$110 billion) is equivalent to 24% of GDP speaks volumes. With 33 billionaires Moscow can boast of the highest number of billionaires for any city, 2 more than New York's 31. (Paul Klebnikov 2004).

While on the other hand, there are also claims that the number of the chronically poor is also on the rise in the rural China. By some accounts 40 to 65 million people who are forced into such a state of poverty. This is happening mainly because many a “new poor” are joining the ranks of those left behind by the growth (Website 1).

Unfortunately the WB accounts seem to be nowhere even close to the picture of China noted by the state agencies and other Chinese scholars. Indeed, they don't seem to be talking

about the same country. In any case, the WB does not accept the Chinese claims and insists on their one and two-dollars-a-day estimates, according to which in 2001 about 16.6% of the population lived under one-dollar-a-day (absolute poverty), while 46.7 percent under two-dollars-a-day (in 2000 they were 18.8 and 52.6 respectively). In real numbers these are, 212 million and 598 million respectively (in 2000 figures, 239.7 million and 672.7 million respectively). WB also maintains that China has succeeded in "lifting" 400 million people out of absolute poverty between 1981 and 2001 (*The Independent*, April 25, 2004). Thus by using its own definition of poverty the WB continues to treat those hundreds of million in China as poor as well as claiming that China has achieved great success by following the market economy. Indeed, WB says that the "progress in reducing poverty in China was fueled by economic reforms, openness to markets and competitions, focus on private initiative and market mechanisms" (*The Independent* April 25, 2004).

On this last point Galbraith, who acted as a technical advisor to the Chinese Government from 1994 to 1997, insists that Washington's policies had little to do with the growth in China. It was the result of the country's own internal reforms many of which date back to the late 1970s (Laura Secor 2003). Galbraith, in his frustration noted that people try to take credit for the growth of China but if any credit is to be given it must go to the Chinese Communist Party. "For God's sake", Galbraith declares, "They run the place" (quoted by Laura Secor 2003). Similarly Rodrik notes that China's growth spurt began before the liberalization and reminds that China is "the last country to play 'by the rules of the game'" and, in any case, was not even a member of WTO or its predecessor GATT before 2003 (Laura Secor 2003). Thus WB has very little to gloat about China's success, even though it is banking on its own rather questionable counts of poverty and poverty alleviation numbers.

Thus the picture painted by the WB of a world in which poverty has declined dramatically or that China has lifted 400 million out of absolute poverty has very little support, even from its own accounts, which are, to say the least, often inconsistent. When compared with the national poverty lines, one is dismayed at the almost opposite picture that emerges as in cases like China. The plight of the poor is the same whether in China, Bangladesh or the US. National poverty lines, more tuned to the situation, do definitely present a clearer picture than the WB accounts. So that the number of poor people in the US (47.8 million) is about the same as in Bangladesh (47.7 million) or even in China which by some accounts is between 40 to 65 million. WB simply has no way of capturing this with its present methodology.

Poverty is worsened by the ratio of incomes going to the various sections of the population. WB simply ignores the impact of this on the worsening poverty in many parts of the world, like in LA. By many accounts the poor in most countries are getting poorer while the rich are getting richer. Andrew Mack (2002) in his essay "The Struggle Against World Poverty: Why Inequality Matters" argues that gross inequalities of income make it more difficult to reduce the worst forms of poverty. He cites very rational grounds for his arguments. First, high levels of national inequality can slowdown the national growth rates largely because the real potential of the poor remain unutilized. He notes that during the last 30 years more egalitarian East Asia grew three times faster than highly unequal Latin America. Second, high inequality levels undermine the effectiveness of growth strategies in reducing poverty. This is true even when the incomes of the poor rise at the same rate as overall growth. He illustrates this with a comparison between Brazil and Indonesia. The poorest fifth of the population in Brazil receive only about 2.5% of the national income while it is 10 % in Indonesia. So that if Indonesia and Brazil grow at the same rate the poorest 20% of Indonesians will increase their income by four times as much as those of the poorest Brazilians! Thus "Decreasing inequality makes economic growth work more effectively for the very poor" (Andrew Mack 2003)

Unfortunately, the attitude of the Bank and the "neoliberal" economists have been that the rich may be getting richer or the ecosystem may be collapsing but so long as the poor are emerging from poverty, everything is nice and sound (Monbiot 2003). And it is the WB alone who has all the facts and figures on poverty to prove it. So by being able to show a reduction in poverty the WB can take credit for its policies. As it definitely does. Deaton (2002) notes

that because China has made continuing progress in reducing poverty, it is possible to paint a rosier picture of the decline of world poverty.

However, Chakravarthi Raghavan (2002) notes that, the Bank was not much interested in this line of arguments until the Copenhagen +5 Summit where due to the pressure from the civil societies the Summit concluded that each country must define an absolute poverty line and aim to eradicate it by a target date to be set by each country. The Bank then, Chakravarthi Raghavan (2002) claims, "hijacked the poverty issue" to argue that the "good policies" (of the Washington Consensus), with some more aid, reduced poverty in countries and that the Bank was best situated to deliver these. The IMF and the UN agencies soon joined the Bank to "have a piece of the action". And thus the Bank became the self-styled crusader against poverty.

## Part Two

Whether WB takes credit for the success in reducing poverty the world over or not, the numbers on which such claims rest have been put in serious doubt, both in their construction and reliability while their validity has been seriously challenged. The WB estimates of poverty seems to be at odds with all national figures, meaning simply that the WB has no idea of the local conditions that prevail in each country. So that when it claims a static position for poverty in LA, some countries report over 80% of the population in poverty. While on the opposite end when countries like China report an end to poverty WB continues to count millions in poverty. But can we depend on their figures? Particularly when the Bank left out countries like China and India, the two countries with almost half of the world's poor, while devising the measurements? Pogge and Reddy (2003) expressed their utter astonishment that everyone working with international poverty issues, including academics, are using the Banks data without ever questioning their validity. Unfortunately the reliance on WB data is so much that everyone is forced to use it simply because this is the only available set of such data. But that does not make the data either accurate or reliable.

Nor is the cause helped much when the same set of WB data yields entirely opposite results. Angus Deaton (2002), notes that by "[u]sing the same data, two reports released less than two years apart by the World Bank reached apparently different conclusions on whether world poverty was going up or down" (*emphasis original*). In the *World Development Report* of 2000/2001 the Bank reported that the number of people living on less than \$1/day grew from 1.18 billion in 1987 to 1.20 billion in 1998—an increase of 20 million. Using the same set of data about two years later in another major WB publication the Bank claimed that the number of people living in poverty fell by 200 million from 1980 to 1998 without showing the previously noted increase between 1987 and 1998! The lifting of 200 million out of poverty was further affirmed in another report in 2002 without ever recognizing the contradiction (Angus Deaton 2002).

Such knowledge of contradictory results make it extremely difficult to accept the recent WB claim that people living in poverty fell from 1.5 billion in 1981 to 1.1 billion in 2001, or that 400 million have been lifted out of poverty. In fact all that has changed in between the previous and the present reports are the base years for which the data have been compiled, i.e. in place of 1980 it is now 1981 and in place of 1998 the data are carried up to 2001. So that we are expected to believe that in three years between 1998 to 2001 another 200 million (making it 400 million altogether) people have been liberated from the curse poverty! Statistics may be a tricky business, but it defies all imagination as to what trickery may be involved in such manipulation of numbers!!

Unfortunately, such are the possibilities of misunderstanding built into the data that by using the same set of statistics other scholars have also arrived at contradictory conclusions and have created even greater confusion. In *Globalization and Its Discontents*, Joseph Stiglitz

claims that severe poverty has persisted at high levels throughout the 1990s. Freedman, reviewing Stiglitz, notes that there is serious controversy about how many people live below the international poverty lines of \$1/day and \$2/day (Nye et al 2002). Because while Stiglitz using the World Bank headcounts gives the figures of 1.2 billion and 2.8 billion, respectively for \$1/day and \$2/day poverty lines, Xavier Sala-i-Martin, a Columbia University economist, finds only 286 million and 980 million only!! (Nye et al 2002). Such and other inconsistencies and contradictions abound in the use of WB figures.

Much of the problem with WB data stem from the attempt to have a single set of construct that can be used universally across countries and still retain its meaningfulness across time. To this end WB uses an ingenious method of calculating an international poverty line on the basis of the purchasing power of \$1. But since all countries of the world do not use the US dollar, the Bank has invented the "purchasing power parity" (PPP), which measures the amount of goods or services that the equivalent of one dollar can buy in different countries in their own currencies (Monbiot 2003). It was further assumed that in some countries like in Latin America and the Caribbean the same goods and services might cost more, so the bank used the \$2 (corrected for PPP) as the poverty line. Guillermo O'Donnell (1996) notes that for LA the upper limit of the operational definition of poverty adopted by some methodologies barely allows to meet the basic needs and it is more so for the WB poverty line of \$60 a month which is lower than others.

It is also interesting to note that since the emergence of the Eastern European and Central Asian countries from the socialist economies the UNDP have instituted a \$4 poverty line for those countries, assuming them to be better off than Latin American (?). We noted the truth of that above. Also, when it finally dawned on them that there are poor people even in the developed countries, particularly in the USA, the core country of capitalism, the UNDP instituted an \$11 poverty line for the developed countries, based on the US poverty line.

However, Nye et al (2002) criticizes this conversion of the dollar into the PPP and says that in the context of poverty assessment, it is a "fatal mistake" to use the PPP. General PPPs, they argue are related to average price levels for all commodities, weighted by their share in international expenditure. A low-income household concentrates on a "quite narrow subset of all commodities", mostly food and other basic necessities. These may be cheaper in the poor countries but not as cheap as the general PPPs suggest. Pogge and Reddy (2003) give the following example to show how misleading such usage may turn out to be. (The example quoted here has been summarized from the original by Monbiot 2003.)

If, for example, one dollar in the US can purchase either the same amount of staple foods that 30 rupees can buy in India, or the equivalent of three rupees' worth of services (such as cleaning, driving or hairdressing), then a purchasing power parity calculation which averages these figures out will suggest that someone in possession of 10 rupees in India has the same purchasing power as someone in possession of one dollar in America. But the extremely poor, of course, do not purchase the services of cleaners, drivers or hairdressers. A figure averaged across all the goods and services an economy can provide, rather than just those bought by the poor, makes the people at the bottom of the heap in this example appear to be three times richer than they are.

In any case the WB first created the poverty measure in 1990 from the household surveys of 33 countries with their official domestic poverty lines (Pogge and Reddy 2003). In reality only eight countries, Bangladesh, Indonesia, Morocco, Nepal, Kenya, Pakistan, the Philippines and Tanzania, were considered. These had a national poverty line of about \$1 per day per person (Jan Vandemoortele 2002). These domestic poverty lines were then adjusted for the 1985 purchasing power parity (PPP) expressed in US dollars. It was reset again in the year 2000 with 1993 PPP. Unfortunately it is not known whether the updated poverty line is based on the same countries. Also that the updated line is based on the "median value" while the original one was based on the "average", which raise questions about their comparability (Jan Vandemoortele 2002). PPP conversion rates for different years are not comparable, so that

the "claim that they measure similar purchasing power in terms of the command over domestic goods is ultimately unverifiable (Jan Vandemoortele 2002).

Pogge and Reddy (2003) argue, that by changing the base year of calculation a wholly different result can be arrived at. Unfortunately, and in spite of the change in the base year, the Bank continued to treat the new base line of \$1.08/day 1993 PPP as the equivalent of the old estimate of \$1/day 1985 PPP. As it is the choice of 1985 or later 1993 as base years is arbitrary. Any other years would yield different figures. However, the effect of this revision of the base line according to Pogge and Reddy (2003) is "dramatic". They explain this with an interesting example. In 1999 applying its old poverty line (\$1/day 1985 PPP) the Bank reported poverty rates for Nigeria and Mauritania of 31.1 and 31.4 respectively. In 2000 applying the new poverty line (\$1.08/day 1993 PPP) the Bank reported poverty rates for Nigeria and Mauritania of 70.2% and 3.8!

Jan Vandemoortele (2002) further adds that the fundamental question is "whether the \$1-per-day norm is valid for tracking change over time or for comparing poverty levels among countries". The main problem with the norm is that it "violates" the standard definition of income-poverty, which treats a person to be poor when s/he cannot attain a minimum level of economic well being set *by society*. Thus absolute poverty is inevitably a relative concept. Therefore, the norm cannot be kept static when measuring poverty over time or for comparing poverty levels across countries. Vandemoortele also notes that as societies reach higher levels of development, "the conceptual relevance of \$1 per day gradually erodes as a measure of income-poverty". Therefore, he argues, adjustments must be made to the poverty norm to take account of the changes in national prosperity, which the WB fail to appreciate.

Thus the whole system, to say the least, is replete with arbitrary measures. Pogge and Reddy (2003) say as much. The Bank, they say, uses "an arbitrary international poverty line unrelated to any clear conception of what poverty is, employs a misleading and inaccurate measure of purchasing power 'equivalence' that creates serious and irreparable difficulties for international and inter-temporal comparisons of income poverty, and extrapolates incorrectly from limited data and thereby creates an appearance of precision that masks the high probable error of its estimates." (Quoted by Chakravarthi Raghavan 2002 ). They also argue that the WB data should not be accepted because they are also conceptually wrong. They identify errors on three counts. First is the failure to define a global poverty line that corresponds to a clear underlying concept of poverty. Second is the failure to employ purchasing-power-parity factors that permit meaningful and accurate identification of the national currency equivalents of the global poverty line, and of changes in their value through time. And the third type of error involves the building into the methods used of false precision and mistaken inferences, in the face of data limitations.(Chakravarthi Raghavan 2002). And because of such conceptual errors the data are likely to yield very distorted picture of poverty and may lead to a substantial underestimation of poverty. These may have lead to the conclusion regarding the lessening of poverty claimed by the Bank where probably it may have actually increased. In any case the data are so flawed that no clear reading of the trend is possible.

Pogge and Reddy (2003) have published an excellent critique of the ways in which the faulty measures were constructed and arbitrarily used. The choice of the household surveys on which the whole set of measures were constructed were done leaving out China and India, as a result of which a "massive element of guess-work and gap-filling" was involved in the construction of the measures. Monbiot (2003) calls it a "mixture of guesswork and wild extrapolation" and adds that a set of global poverty figures, presented with six-digit precision, which contains no useful comparative data from the two largest nations on earth, could be described as *imaginative*. Pogge and Reddy thus conclude that "the current estimates should no longer be employed, and new ones corresponding to a defensible methodology, covering past as well as current years, should be generated."



The Bank, fortunately, took these accusations seriously and responded to them. Martin Ravallion argues for the Bank that Pogge and Reddy claims do not stand up to close inspection. Reddy and Pogge (2002) in a reply refutes every one of the Ravallion criticisms showing that he seriously misstates some of their criticisms and gives inadequate response to others and fails to address some others and they continue to stand by their own analysis. With or without the Bank's acceptance of the criticism, Reddy and Pogge have definitely stirred up the hornet's nest. They have shown that by using a faulty methodology WB have generated a picture of poverty that may have underestimated people below poverty line by as much as 30 or 40%. Similarly, Other studies, including those of the UN, which follow the WB method of the poverty count, have also commented on the shortcomings of the WB data. The Least Developed Countries Report 2002, recently published by the UNCTAD questioned the World Bank's poverty data calculated from household surveys, and claimed that these understated the extent of poverty in Africa. Although the report did not challenge the methodology it suggested the use of national income data instead (Chakravarthi Raghavan 2002). Jan Vandemoortele (2002) similarly finds that the use of the \$1-per-day poverty norm "under-estimates the extent of global poverty; at the same time it over-estimates progress in reducing income-poverty" and argues that these distortions could be avoided by using national poverty lines that are adjusted regularly.

Although few are equipped to challenge the data of the Bank, as Chakravarthi Raghavan (2003) notes, some like the civil societies at the Copenhagen +5 Summit did challenge the WB claims of poverty reduction as the Summit found little evidence of it at the country level. Similarly others, like Pogge and Reddy, also have very strong reservations about the WB data. Vandemoortele (2002) shows that the quest for comparable poverty data is elusive and that the global poverty estimates of the WB "are not a reliable source of information". Commenting on a similar set of WB data on inequality James K Galbraith says that the WB has compiled the best set of household survey data into a single set of inequality data and the "result is just nonsense". In his opinion, "[i]t's not consistent across countries, it's not consistent through time - it fails every reasonable standard of reliability" He goes on to argue that the WB data are so inconsistent "that they produce measures that are *obviously false*" (Galbraith quoted by Laura Secor 2003). George Monbiot (2003) finds the WB figures "without foundation" and "useless".

Therefore, Pogge and Reddy are genuinely surprised that the WB has been publishing their poverty data on a regular basis and others, including the academics, are using these without paying "significant attention" to the "massive flaws" in its procedures. These actually go to show the crass attitude with which the Bank deals with poverty and the poverty alleviation issues. Monbiot (2003) in his essay "Rich in Imagination" concludes "[t]hat the key global economic statistic has for so long been derived by means which are *patently useless* is a telling indication of how little the men who run the world care about the impact of their policies. If they cannot be bothered even to produce a meaningful measure of global poverty, we have no reason to believe their claim that they wish to address it" (Monbiot 2003). These merely speak of the poverty of the Bank itself.

Yet it may not be so difficult to have a methodology to measure poverty across countries and to make it comparable over time. Pogge and Reddy (2003) have suggested the construction of a reference basket of commodities that allows the individual to meet the basic requirements. The international poverty line could then be constructed on the basis of the local currency needed to purchase this reference basket in the country or in a locality within the country. The procedure thus focuses on a specific basket of goods needed by the poor and not a general list of commodities and these could be revised depending on the situation. Some countries already use this or a similar consumer basket of goods for their measurement of poverty lines. For instance Gao Hongbin, the Chinese official quoted above, insisted that 22 cents were all that was required in rural China to buy the necessities, "that is, to have enough to eat and wear and to have a place to dwell" (Agence France Presse 2000). Jan Vandemoortele (2002) in his study concludes that trends based on national poverty lines are likely to provide more meaningful information than the \$1/day estimate. The \$1/day merely distorts the reality.

Benjamin Friedman (2002) agrees with Pogge and Reddy and says that “thinking of poverty in this context as the inability to purchase some basic basket of consumer necessities—presumably including food, shelter, clothing, and so on— is a superior strategy”. He is of course aware of the difficulties involved in implementing such a scheme. However, he adds that the US is one of the few countries that try to define its poverty line on the basis of what Pogge and Reddy suggest. Friedman also argues in favour of looking at poverty as both a *relative* concept and as an *absolute* concept and says that the distinction between the two is very important. He points out that most countries treat poverty as a *relative* concept in which “if the average person's income moves up, then to stay out of poverty someone at the bottom of the scale needs more income too” (Friedman 2002). The US is the only country that uses the *absolute* concept in which, “if the average person's income rises, but the prices of consumer necessities (as represented by food) remain unchanged, then it takes no more income to stay out of poverty than before”. He suggests that the *absolute* concept of poverty may be used for international comparisons as Pogge and Reddy advocate, while the *relative* concept may be used for domestic discussion within the country as is already done in most countries.

In any case, poverty seen through such constructs merely reveals the tip of the iceberg. To capture the reality of poverty many different notions of poverty need to be looked into including income poverty, which is only one aspect of poverty. Other poverty estimates, based on under-nutrition, infant mortality, access to health services, and other indicators, can continue to inform us even in the absence of usable figures concerning global income poverty (Chakravarthi Raghavan 2002).

Most countries of the world use one or a number of these notions separately or in combination to assess poverty. Although a unitary set of statistics could serve better for international comparison, the one generated by the World Bank is not the answer. Perhaps, a measure like the “net worth”, which is often used to estimate the wealth of the rich, may serve as a better indicator. As wealth, or the “net worth” of the personal possessions, is likely to be a more constant feature than income or consumption and may be more amenable to cross country comparisons.

It is unfortunate that the WB data are so poor, especially because the WB remains as the only source of such data and the WB figures influence or guide major policy decisions all over the world including the alleviation of poverty and poverty aids. It is also regretted that WB does not allow access to its databases. Most of the data used in the poverty counts are not available to independent researchers or to agencies outside the Bank (Deaton 2002). As such no independent verification is possible, and, therefore, WB data lack transparency. Deaton (2002), to make the data more transparent, calls for an independent outside agency or an auditor “who either produces the numbers under a carefully specified contract or verifies their construction”. Pogge and Reddy (2003) call for a proper methodology and the conversion to a specific set of commodities for assessing the poverty line and until that is done *not to use* the present measures as their use can only lead to a misunderstanding of this important issue.

Thus from the above it stands to reason that the data and the arguments presented in Part One are redundant. The claims to the reduction of poverty by the WB, whether in China or in the rest of the world, not only fail to be convincing they are most likely to be wrong. They are definitely not based on any reliable methodology or on a valid notion of poverty. With so much at stake, particularly the reduction of poverty itself, researchers and policy makers alike require a more reliable set of data than the WB has so far produced. The Bank has the resources to provide a more reliable set of data, or even use an alternative system, like following the national poverty lines or use a construct based on an altogether different concept than income poverty. The current set of WB data are flawed on so many counts

that they do not only distort reality, their use amounts to a cruel joke perpetrated on the poor of the world. The poor definitely deserve better than that from the Bank.

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## Poverty, Household Strategies and Coping with Urban Life: Examining 'Livelihood Framework' in Dhaka City, Bangladesh

- Shahadat Hossain\*

**Abstract:** The livelihood framework suggests that poverty is not only a product of material deprivation but of a set of interlocking factors, including physical weakness, social isolation, vulnerability and powerlessness. The paper aims to explain how the poor cope with urban life through their household strategies in reference to livelihood framework. Data have been collected from five hundred urban poor living in three different neighbourhoods in Dhaka City, Bangladesh, by using a structured questionnaire. The study reveals that the poor face extreme poverty and vulnerability in terms of their economic and social conditions and cope with these adverse situations having adopted different strategies in their households. The paper argues that the urban poor adopt such strategies through their household to survive in the city as they have limited access to the existing economic and social systems.

**Key words:** Urban Poverty, Household Strategies, Livelihood, Dhaka City, Bangladesh

### Introduction

The most accepted explanation of poverty is provided by social scientists who attempt to combine both material and non-material dimensions of poverty (Chambers 1989; 1992; Sen 1981; 1997). This suggests that poverty is a product not just of material conditions, but also of a set of interlocking factors, including physical weakness, social isolation, vulnerability and powerlessness. The poverty of a household is related to its resource endowments, its organisational capacity to manage and deploy its resources, its labour force position, the available coping mechanisms and external or family contingencies which affect it (Rakodi 1995). Household strategies are those implicit principles that guide household members when seeking household goods for coping with urban life. This suggests that people can choose, and choices make a difference, despite the economic or social constraints they face. By pooling resources, by working in both formal and informal economies, by the self-construction of shelter, by self-provisioning, and by the skilful use of social networks, families avoid entrapment in a self-perpetuating culture of poverty (Roberts 1994). The issue of urban poverty in developing countries attracts research attention in recent times as the major urban centres in these countries face tremendous pressure of population with insufficient infrastructure and social services. In recent decades the issue of urban poverty in Bangladesh has attracted attention from scholars especially social scientists as the major cities of the country face serious challenges of population and poverty (BBS 1998; Islam 1990; Khundker et al 1994; ADB 1997; Hossain and Humphrey 2002; Prayer 2003). Most of the studies use macro level data to explain the trend and pattern of urban poverty. Some of them use micro-level data to explain the spatial and economic characteristics of the urban poor. But a few studies focus on the coping mechanisms of the urban poor used in an adverse urban setting. However, attempts have been made in this paper to explain livelihood framework, which has been used recently in analysing urban poverty and to explain the faces of recent urban poverty and the strategies adopted by the poor in their households to cope with urban life.

### Data and Method

Data were collected from three lower income neighbourhoods in Dhaka City, Bangladesh between October 2002 to July 2003. These neighbourhoods include Adabor (under City Ward-43), Gandaria (under City Ward-81) and Kalsi (under City Ward-2). The neighbourhoods were selected as research sites because they represent different forms of adaptations of poor households in the city. Five hundred urban poor were interviewed from three neighbourhoods based on their employment, income, household structure as well as migration pattern. A structured questionnaire, constructed on various forms of household adaptations such as,

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economic activities, expenditure and purchasing pattern, shelter and environmental services, using social services, rural-urban ties, social network and community participation, was used for data collection. Mainly descriptive statistics (percentages) were used for data analysis. The data from the household survey have been supplemented by some qualitative data to demonstrate the coping strategies of the urban poor in Dhaka City, Bangladesh. The study reveals that the urban poor experience miserable economic and social conditions and cope with the adverse urban situations through strategies adopted mainly in their households.

### **Explaining 'Livelihood Framework'**

The increased attention being paid to urban livelihoods follows from a wide recognition that significant portions of urban poor households in developing countries are vulnerable in terms of their sustainable livelihood systems (Rakodi 1995). A livelihood is generally defined as comprising the capabilities, assets, including both material and social resources, and activities required for a means of living. A livelihood is sustainable when it can cope with and recover from stresses and shocks and maintain or enhance its capabilities and assets both now and in the future, while not undermining the natural resource base. A livelihoods framework to development draws on a conceptual framework which may be used as a basis for analysing, understanding and managing the complexity of livelihoods:

The livelihood framework is a tool that helps to define the scope of and provide the analytical basis for livelihoods analysis, by identifying the main factors affecting livelihoods and the relationships between them; to help those concerned with supporting the livelihoods of poor people to understand and manage their complexity; to become a shared point of reference for all concerned with supporting livelihoods, enabling the complementarity of contributions and the trade-offs between outcomes to be assessed; to provide a basis for identifying appropriate objectives and interventions to support livelihoods. At the centre of the framework are the assets on which households or individuals draw to build their livelihoods (Carney cited in Rakodi 2002:9)

The indicators of Poverty Line analysis based on household consumption do not capture all dimensions of poverty, especially from the viewpoint of poor people themselves. Poverty is not defined solely in terms of low incomes, but uses broader concepts of deprivation and insecurity. And any attempt to place monetary values on these aspects of personal, household and social deprivation involves so many arbitrary assumptions that it is likely to be meaningless. Deprivation occurs when people are unable to reach a certain level of functioning or capability. Chambers (1983; 1989) includes physical weakness, isolation, vulnerability and powerlessness in addition to lack of income and assets. A pyramid starting from income poverty as the most measurable, to access to common pool resources, state-provided commodities, assets, dignity and autonomy is identified.

In livelihood framework poverty is thus characterised not only by a lack of assets and inability to accumulate a portfolio of them, but also by the lack of choice with respect to alternative coping strategies. The poorest and most vulnerable households are forced to adopt strategies, which enable them to survive but not to improve their welfare. In urban areas households seek to mobilise resources and opportunities and to combine these into a livelihood strategy which is a mix of labour market involvement; savings; borrowing and investment; productive and reproductive activities; income, labour and asset pooling; and social net-working (Grown and Sebstad cited in Rakodi 2002). Households and individuals adjust the mix according to their own circumstances and the changing context in which they live. Economic activities form the basis of a household strategy, but to them, and overlapping with them, may be added migration movements, maintenance of ties with rural areas, urban food production, decisions about access to services such as education and housing, and participation in social networks. The 'livelihoods' concept is a realistic recognition of the multiple activities, in which households engage to ensure their survival and improve their well being, as will be explored further below (Ellis 1998).

Livelihoods approaches propose that thinking in terms of strengths or assets is vital as an antidote to the view of poor people as 'passive' or 'deprived'. Central to the approach is the need to recognise that those who are poor may not have cash or other savings, but that they do have

other material or non-material assets - their health, their labour, their knowledge and skills, their friends and family, and the natural resources around them. Livelihoods approaches require a realistic understanding of these assets in order to identify what opportunities they may offer, or where constraints may lie. Proponents argue that it is more conceptually appropriate, empirically sound and of more practical use to start with an analysis of strengths as opposed to an analysis of needs. However, it has also been suggested that there is a danger that this emphasis may restrict policy and actions to households that have some assets on which they can build and neglect the poorest and the destitute, who may be effectively assetless (Rakodi 2002).

Social capital is defined as rules, norms, obligations, reciprocity and trust embedded in social relations, social structures, and society's institutional arrangements, which enable its members to achieve their individual and community objectives. Levels of social capital and the ability to call on the social networks involved vary in space and time. They may break down because of repeated shocks like drought, economic crisis or physical insecurity like violence and crime (Moser 1996). Social networks are not all supportive of the poor or effective as social capital and are generally thought to be less robust in urban areas because of the mobility and heterogeneity of their populations. Closely linked to social capital is political capital, based on access to the political process and decision-making, and best seen as a gatekeeper asset, permitting or preventing the accumulation of other assets. In urban setting, informal cultural networks can serve to transpose ethnocentric or patriarchal rural arrangements that otherwise may have been under threat. The dual potential of social capital is described as follows:

Social capital (or informal networks) built by households over generations in the village may take on a different form in dynamic, multi-cultural urban context where people come and go. This can induce new forms of social organisation at the community and city levels which provide the basis for more effective pooling of resources for lobbying of political leaders, engaging in partnership with civil society, the private sector and local government and for undertaking community development and management initiatives. It can also, however, promote an increasing sense of isolation as slum new comers are denied the 'citizenship rights' of older occupants, and tenants are excluded from participating in community activities (DFID 2001: 10).

The livelihood framework now turns to the structures and processes in the macro environment that impact on urban poverty and vulnerability. Livelihood systems and community networks develop in the context of shifting relationships between the state, market and society. These shifts are significant for urban vulnerability as they entail a redistribution of power and responsibility in relation to poverty reduction and development. As Beall and Kanji note (1999:21-22):

*The emphasis by mainstream development agencies on partnership, decentralisation and 'community participation' has increased during the 1990s. Decentralisation has involved a shift in the role of central governments from direct providers of services to enablers, creating a regulatory and financial environment in which private enterprises, households and community groups can play an increasing role in meeting their own needs. Responsibilities have shifted to local (public and private) levels. While decentralisation has the potential to provide new opportunities for previously excluded groups to participate in local planning process, much depends on local power structures and the mobilisation of resources often remains a critical problem.*

However, livelihood framework begins 'from the bottom up', drawing largely from literature on sustainable livelihoods. It then considers the structures and process 'from the top down' that enable and constrain urban development. The final component of the framework includes a focus on urban governance as the meeting ground between these two constructs.

### **Poverty, Household Strategies and Coping with Urban Life: Evidence from Dhaka City Economic Activities**

The urban poor are mostly employed in self-managed low paid jobs in the informal urban sectors like rickshaw pulling (29.4%), street vending and selling (22.8%), construction work (6.4%), driving and transport work (4.6%), factory work (5.2%) and personal servicing (7.6%). A small portion (4.8%) work in government and semi-government organizations. About 35% of the urban poor frequently face underemployment due to lack of employment opportunities, physical illness, staying in their ancestral villages. Significant portions of the urban poor (32%) are harassed physically, mentally and sexually at their work places. About 12% of the urban poor mentioned about unsafe working condition, which sometimes causes injuries and damages to their physical and mental health. The rates of income, wage and productivity are very low among the urban poor. The average monthly income of households is only Taka 4452 (US\$75). But the intra-household income difference (Sd.2453) is quite significant. The condition of female-headed households is comparatively more miserable than male-headed households.

Entering more household members into the workforce is the main survival strategy of the urban poor. This is why female participation in the urban work force is considerably higher among the poor than among their rural counterpart. Sometimes the female members use domestic spaces for both production and reproduction through operating income-generating activities with the assistance from other family members. This type of home based work is a manifestation of the urban poor women's involvement in the household production-reproduction sphere in the local space- the setting where poor women live with the members of their households.

#### **Expenditure and Purchasing Pattern**

The urban poor mostly spend their earnings to fulfil their basic needs especially for food and shelter. The average monthly household expenditure is only Tk.4156 (US\$70). There is also a high level of intra household differentials (Sd.1957.18) in expenditure. The expenditure of single headed households in the city is comparatively lower than other forms of poor households. More than 60% of the earnings of single headed households are spent in the rural areas where their family members are also living. The expenditure of male-headed households is higher than that of the female-headed households. About 57% of the poor who are living in the low cost housing developed in low-lying land in urban peripheries spend a certain amount of their earning on housing. As most of their earning is used for food and shelters, the poor spend very small portion of their earning on clothing, medicine, education and other incidentals.

The urban poor mainly buy food items like rice, pulses, potatoes and vegetables at a low cost from retail shops located in their neighbourhoods. They rarely go to wholesale markets to buy such a small amount of goods though the price of goods in those markets is comparatively lower. They usually buy bad quality fish from local fish-markets at low costs. Moreover, they can not afford expensive items like meat, milk and fruit. About 50% of the urban poor buy meat or poultry once or twice a month. It was found that 59% and 71.8% did not buy milk or fruit in the week they were interviewed either. The urban poor rarely buy new clothes from the market places. Most of them get used clothes from relatives, landlords and employers. They sometimes buy cheap clothes for their family members from second-hand markets. Besides these cheap clothes, they buy used cookeries, furniture and other household goods from second hand markets at low price.

#### **Shelter and Environmental Services**

The urban poor have little access to urban land and they mostly build their houses on vacant private and government land and thereby become squatters in the city. Most of them are living in *jupri* which are constructed from low cost housing materials like tin, bamboo, straw and polythene. These houses become more vulnerable during rainy season. Only 18% of the households are living in *semi pucca* / *pucca* housing with permanent walls. And most (73.8%) of these poor urban dwellers are used to living in single roomed housing. In many cases more than five members of the households live in one congested room. Of the single headed households, most live in appalling conditions with twenty to thirty people living in a single room. Only 15.6% households, with extended families, live in housing with more than one room. The majority of households (54%) have no cooking facilities and they cook inside their only room or open spaces.



Another 46% have access to a common *chula* (oven) - where ten to fifteen households share one kitchen with four to six *chulas*.

About sixty percent of households use firewood and straw for cooking, which are mostly collected by them. They sometime get electricity connections from informal sources and their access to electricity is inadequate and irregular. Most of the poor have no individual access to the city's water supply and they collect water for drinking from a common municipal tap or from hand tube-wells. They usually wait for a long period of time to get water from public municipal taps. More than 65% of households have no access to city sewerage systems and share pit latrines, which are temporary and made by them. This type of latrines pollutes neighbourhood environment as well as the whole city environment. Most of the poor (64.4%) living in the city have no access to drainage facilities. Only 17.8% have access to municipal waste disposal facilities and the rest of them dispose in generally marshy land adjacent to their settlements, which also pose serious challenge to the environment of the neighbourhood.

### Using Social Services

The urban poor have very limited access to the existing health care facilities. Only 33.4% use services from city health centres, most of which are operated by Non-Government Organizations (NGO). Less attention from physicians (22.6%), lack of medicine in the hospitals (17.6%), high fees and charges (11 %) and far to travel (14%) are the major reasons for not using government hospitals by the urban poor. The majority (58.2%) get their medicine from pharmacies without the consultation of trained physicians. About 29% of the poor take medical advice regarding maternal health from the health centres operated by NGOs. At the period of child delivery only about 5% of the poor takes help from the doctors and nurses and the rest of them take help mostly from untrained persons, family members and relatives.

The poor have low level of education and employment training. More than 60% of the poor have had no formal schooling in their lifetime. There is at least one school-age child in 50% of the households who is not currently attending school. Despite the high percentage of illiteracy among the urban poor a very small portion of them attended non-formal education programs (NFEP) managed by NGOs. The poor have low level of employment training, and have limited access to such training. Only about 17% of the poor ever attended in skill development training program.

Due to poverty the poor can hardly think about recreation and socialising. They rarely participate in the city's cultural activities despite living in the city over a long period of time. They typically pass their leisure time by gossiping with family members as well as community members. They have little access to outdoor game facilities in the city and they pass their time by playing few indoor games like carom, ludo and card games. Some of them pass their leisure time only by watching television at their homes or in some communal places. Only 21.6% of the poor in the city go to parks, zoos and museums for recreation.

### Rural-Urban Ties

The urban poor migrated from different rural districts due to 'push' and 'pull' factors. River erosion (14.6%), small income in the rural areas (20%), available job services in the city (32.8%) and accompanying the family (17%) are major reasons for their migration to the city. But after migration to the city the poor migrants fail to achieve their expectations and sometimes they consider their previous life better than present one. But they don't move from the city due to their present economic reality. Despite living in the city for a long period of time they do not generally loose their bonds with their villages. Gugler (1997) refers it as 'life in a dual system'.

### Box-1: Major Household Strategies of the Urban Poor

#### Economic Activities

##### Involvement in urban informal sectors

Participation of female/children in labour force

Changing domestic spaces for production and consumption

Urban agriculture

#### Expenditure and Purchasing Pattern

Spending money mostly for food items

<p>Spending little amount for non food items          Avoiding luxurious items  <b>Buying second-hand clothes at low price</b></p> <p><b>Shelter and Environmental Services</b>          Self-help housing with low cost materials          Renting low cost housing/ Leasing land and renting houses to others          Using utility services from informal sources          Collecting firewood</p> <p><b>Using Social Services</b>  <b>Using local pharmacies for medicine</b>          Using folk medicine          Using health services provided by Non-government Organizations          Sending children to schools of Non-government Organizations          Recreation by indoor games</p> <p><b>Rural-Urban Ties</b>          Meeting relatives in villages          Visited by village guests          Sending money to villages</p> <p>Cultivation in villages</p> <p><b>Social Network</b>          Using kinship for social network          Using fictive kinship (village fellow)  <b>Making neighbourhood based social network</b>  <b>Maintaining patron-client relationships</b></p> <p><b>Community Participation</b>          Using informal power structure          Involvement with community based organizations  <b>Using urban development agencies</b></p> <hr/> <p>Participating in urban politics</p>
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The urban poor felt better identifying themselves as villagers rather than city dwellers. About 80% of the urban poor maintain a connection with villages, which they visit at least once a year. But the connection with rural districts is correlated with the period of stay in the city and the pattern of migration. The number of those visiting rural areas is significantly higher among recent and temporary migrants than long-term and permanent migrants. Although meeting relatives (43.6%) and providing financial help (23%) are the most common reasons for visiting rural areas, 10.2% of the urban poor visit rural areas mainly for observing *Edul-Fetar*, a religious festival. Another 15.2% visited rural areas to look after their former homesteads and agricultural land, bringing back rice, wheat, vegetables and fruit cultivated by them or by their relatives. Few urban poor who have small amount of savings buy agricultural land in their ancestral villages.

### **Social Network**

Social networking plays an important role in coping with urban life since it works as 'social capital'. The urban poor maintain both 'blood' networks (12.8%) and marriage networks (7.4%) in the city. Beside these kinship networks they have fictive network - based mainly on their district of origin. This type of network becomes social capital in the context of migration to the city - by providing migration related information and adaptation to city life, and by providing initial accommodation and employment information. After migration to the city neighbourhood where they live, it becomes important in terms of their social network. About 37% of the urban poor have close relationships with their neighbours. Employment and land lordship also plays important role for social networks for a considerable portion of urban poor.

The poor mostly maintain their relationships with relatives, friends and village fellows who are living in the same community. Only about 16% have connections with the people living outside their immediate neighbourhoods. The poor households who are living in the city for a long period of time have wider social network. These long-term households maintain more relationships outside their communities than the households recently migrated to the city. Social network working as a social capital helps to perpetuate reciprocity in their microeconomic life. More than 50% of the urban poor visit and invite each other to social occasions. The relatives, friends and neighbours help the poor to mitigate their economic and social crisis. More than 53% of the poor provide/receive financial help from their kin, fictive kin and neighbours and another 27% of them provide/receive non-financial support from these relatives and friends.

### **Community Participation**

Grouping, factionalism and feuds are characteristics of the urban poor. The poor form committees to resolve existing conflicts in the neighbourhood. They rarely rely on help from law enforcement agencies (especially the police) to mediate in or mitigate their problems. More than 28% of the urban poor are members of different community based political organizations, cooperatives and voluntary organizations. The rural districts from where the urban poor migrated plays an important role in community-based organization. Hossain (2000: 105) points out, "regional factors has become the main cause of groupings and organization. District of origin divides them into different fractions and leaders are sometimes selected considering their rural origin."

Their participation is not limited to their own communities. Most (64.6%) are registered city voters and about 55% cast their votes in the last city corporation election. But their level of integration with city politics is determined by their household structure. The single headed households who have mostly migrated to the city recently are not interested in city politics. They are mostly interested to earn more money so that they can support their family members. But the majority (68.4%) shared strong nationalist or liberal political ideology and cast their votes mostly based on their party ideology. A considerable portion of the poor (27.4%) participates in action politics like picketing during strikes, joining public meetings and joining party meetings. Despite participating in different political activities and maintaining contact with the elected bodies they can not achieve their expected goals. The leaders use them for their interests and generally ignore their claims. Due to their poverty and vulnerability they cannot exert any strong pressure upon urban government. They consider them vulnerable and powerless in the city; as such they are not interested to attend the protests against urban government.

### **Conclusion**

Rural-urban migration does not create improved opportunities for a significant portion of city dwellers living in slums as squatters. They invariably live below the poverty line and have little access to employment in formal sectors. They have failed to secure a sustainable livelihood in the city despite living for a long period of time. The poor communities are vulnerable in terms of their physical and social capital. They have little access to the city's social and political structure, which also shows their vulnerable situation. Urban government has little initiative to create opportunities for the poor sections of city's population. The poor communities cope with urban life through 'household strategies' such as: putting more family members into the work force, through petty trading, avoiding many basic goods, which represent luxuries to them, increasing their household size by inducting more relatives, withdrawing their children from education, constructing their own shelter, using kinship as social capital, and establishing patron-client relationships with local leaders. There is an intra-household variation of coping with poverty and deprivation based on households having more than one income earning member, having access to urban or rural land, living in self constructed housing and a renting room to others, having access to city politics for better prospects of wellbeing. However, the livelihood framework explains their situations very well, as it combines both local level issues of the community and macro structures.

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# Expectations as limitations

## Sociology's challenges in development studies

- Malin Arvidson\*

### Introduction

... the interest of the sociologist is primarily theoretical. That is, he is interested in understanding for its own sake. He may be aware of or even concerned with the practical applicability and consequences of his findings, but at that point he leaves the sociological frames of reference as such and moves into realms of values, beliefs and ideas that he shares with other men who are not sociologists.

(Berger 1966: 28-29)

The quote above comes from Peter L. Berger's *Invitation to Sociology*, where he presents his view of the role of sociology and the sociologist in society. Berger emphasises the difference between being a researcher and being a practitioner, and he forwards a view that the role of sociology is to explore ways of understanding social phenomena, not to prescribe solutions to social problems. The quote is a useful starting point for a discussion that examines the relation between sociology and development studies and development in practice. What is the difference between a sociology researcher, and a policy advocate? What is the difference between posing a sociological question and giving policy recommendations?

This text is partly a result of experience gained while working on my PhD thesis in sociology over the period 1998-2002 (see Arvidson, 2003). The focus of the thesis is participation, empowerment and NGOs in the context of development projects in Bangladesh. The work involved fieldwork in the districts of Comilla and Rajshahi, following local NGOs implementing foreign funded development projects with a particular focus on participation and empowerment strategies. The work brought me into close contact with the development world, taking part in how villagers and NGOs involved in development projects respond to and handle participation- and empowerment-strategies, as well as reviews and evaluations of projects. What I felt were essential issues captured during the empirical work did however not quite correspond to the discussions found in much of the literature dealing with the concepts of participation, empowerment and NGOs in the context of development. The discussions were rather strictly confined to the development world, based on predictable studies and rather limited analyses. The discrepancy between what was presented in these texts and what I saw as interesting issues that unveiled from my empirical work can be described as a result of different positions regarding the role of the researcher and of sociology in relation to social studies. The following text aims at defining sociology's role, and at delineating what challenges sociology faces in the context of development studies.

### Sociology in the context of development

Research related to development work is increasingly becoming multidisciplinary. Hence, sociology as well as anthropology is given more space alongside a previously dominating focus on economics in studies aiming at describing and understanding different aspects of poverty and change. However, this invitation also brings great challenges to sociology as an academic discipline. Development studies are linked to an aim at improving people's lives. This has a

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bearing on research conducted since it provides temptations and expectations for the researcher to take on a role of a participating actor attempting to solve vital, perhaps even urgent, practical problems. These temptations and expectations come from several directions.

While undertaking fieldwork in rural Bangladesh for my PhD, I came into contact with some of the difficulties poor people are facing on a daily basis. Through listening to stories of villagers and NGO staff, through being invited into people's lives and gradually understanding everyday struggles and problems it is easy to feel a personal wish, as well as a moral obligation, to give something back. And expectations to do so are not imagined but often clearly expressed from interviewees in various ways. My presence in the village was met by skepticism – 'what is my benefit?' – as well as cordial invitation into people's houses for shared inquiry into each other's lives. Whether tainted by a reserved or a friendly attitude, meetings very often resulted in thoughts about what role I could play, if any, in people's strivings towards a better life.

Although this is not expressed in a clear way, the tone in much of today's development literature forward similar expectations. The researcher is expected to take on an active role, in the field through action research promoting local empowerment, or through using the researcher's (relatively) powerful position to argue strongly for a particular development approach that is declared as more appropriate than others.

Expectations are not only expressed in relation to the role of the researcher, but also in relation to the actual results presented from empirical work. In his chapter 'To Bite the Hands that Feed', David Lewis identifies 'externally-driven, applied agendas' as one danger that anthropology is facing and requests that anthropology carefully reviews its relationship with development studies (Lewis, 2002: 73). Sociology shares problems related to expectations coming from an externally driven research agendas. The research undertaken is expected to result in short and clear policy recommendations, which severely limits the possibility to elaborate on topics in a more academic fashion.

Working as a researcher in a development context one may ask are these not reasonable expectations? The immediate answer would be yes. Academic work in general has since long been criticized for being too distant from reality, and for treating the researched as passive objects rather than active subjects. Many sociologists, Norman Long among them, have criticized a bias towards theoretical focus on structure and a neglect of the active and purposive individual (Long, 2001). Long, working as a sociologist within development studies, emphasises the importance of an actor-oriented approach, based on recognition of the concept of agency. The critique has also been met by the development of new methods such as action research and different types of people's participation. Sociology is continuously exploring new ways of relating to the researched, moving from emphases on distance and objectivity to seeing closeness and empathy as important features of the research process.

However, the answer 'yes' to the question just posed harbors several interpretations of how the researcher's engagement should be expressed. A more appropriate question to explore than the one posed above would hence be to look into how the researcher's responsibility and engagement vis à vis reality and the researched can be expressed. In order to do this we need to open up for a more general discussion on how we may define the role of sociology in society.

#### **In search for meaning: posing sociological questions**

*Sociologist Berger identifies a skeptical attitude as one important characteristic of sociological studies (Berger, 1966). This is an essential starting point if sociology is to achieve what Berger describes as sociology's task which is to show new interpretations of already known things, to question the taken for granted, and to contribute with an interpretation that tells something more than just the sum of information acquired through empirical work (ibid., see also Asplund 1970; Bauman, 1990).*

How then may we reach the knowledge sociology aspires to achieve? How do we transcend the already known and reach an interpretation of social life, which is more than the

sum of experience of many individuals? Sociologist Asplund discusses the art of exploring social phenomena through elaborating on the precarious but essential difference between *describing* a social phenomenon and *problematizing* the very same (Asplund, 1970). This discussion is, I believe, essential to sociology. One type of analysis may consist of elaborate descriptions of a defined phenomenon. Descriptions may involve historical accounts, delineation of its prevalence, and contextual relations. Without claiming that such an analytical outline is incorrect or useless, Asplund argues that such a descriptive analysis *pointless*, or what we may call a-theoretical. An elaborate description will explain the phenomenon but in a limited way. It will give us the comfort of having achieved precise knowledge of the phenomenon in question, but it will not have enlightened us upon its *meaning*.

An analysis that strives to understand the meaning of a phenomenon will try various interpretations in order *to see the phenomenon as something*. A focus on *meaning* will not demand a different set of data compared to a descriptive analysis, but it aims at achieving a deeper understanding of the phenomenon. The strategy for achieving this goal is not to ascertain an increasing and abundant amount of exact and detailed data, but to acquire a flexible way of seeing. The ability to use various perspectives and to accept different explanatory models in order to understand a social phenomenon is crucial. Asplund calls a lack in such ability 'aspect-blindness'. While we should accept that theories are not identical images of reality, we should see theories as useful in that they provide us with different aspects of reality. Reality becomes intelligible through comparing reality to theories. This is how theories should be used, and this is what 'seeing something as something' means. A search for significance, the meaning, of a phenomenon leads to types of interpretations that do not lend themselves to verifications since they are not necessarily based on empirical generalizations. These interpretations are exaggerations, like Weber's ideal-types, and their value lie in the fact that they *present a point*.

However, elaborating on different interpretations of a phenomenon is but one part of the research process. The argument for a focus on meaning rather than description is spurred by what Asplund calls 'greediness. Analyses focusing on descriptions based on statistical or ethnographic information are not necessarily incorrect as such. However the sociological analysis remains incomplete if the process ends by an orderly account of what the data presents. Although such accounts enlighten us on important things concerning the prevalence and history of a particular phenomenon, the sociologist must, argues Asplund, continue the inquiry by asking the question *what does this mean?* It is crucial to find a balance between data gathering (being it through qualitative or quantitative methods) and an aptitude for problematising data, which is inquiring into the meaning of the data that has been obtained.

#### **Is development research 'pointless'?**

Now how is this discussion applicable to an inquiry into challenges faced by sociology in the context of development studies? The caution raised by Asplund against greediness over data and a lack of sociological inquisitiveness that takes the analysis beyond that of a pure description is highly relevant to research done within development studies.

The claim that studies made in relation to development projects is directed by a pre-determined agenda is perhaps not particularly surprising. After all, such studies are made in order to assess feasibility, to monitor ongoing processes, and to evaluate outcomes of specific interventions. However, the character of studies carried out under the headline 'academic research' is very often similar to project related studies. Also development studies, and not only work related to development in practice, carry expectations which have come to emphasise moral obligations vis à vis the subject studied. These obligations seem often to be interpreted in such a way that practice and policy recommendations rather than a sociological interest in the meaning of social phenomena is prioritized. This is obvious in much of the development literature, which is described by Ferguson as characterized by a focus on what in development interventions goes wrong, why and how it can be fixed (Ferguson, 1996). In his review of development literature he sees that authors identify development as a great collective effort to achieve progress, and analyses within this perspective are aimed at creating a basis for better performance. Similarly

authors van Ufford, Giri and Mosse (van Ufford & Giri, 2003: chapter 1) use words such as 'manageability' and 'social engineering' when describing the character of development studies as well as practice. Again, the focus is on 'fixing things' rather than on an inquisitiveness that allows for an emphasis on incoherence and complexity of social phenomenon.

In the context of Bangladesh, the influence of donors is particularly strong. Research is being conducted with the main aim of producing material for modification of policies and development projects. In Bangladeshi literature we often find that research is conducted with an aim at being directly applicable in policy-making processes (see e.g. Kalam, 1996). This is mainly put down to the fact that donors' interests are setting the agenda and studies are rarely conducted with long-term or academic perspectives. Donors are 'concerned with results which can quickly be fed into the administration of development projects' (van Schendel & Westergaard, 1997:xi). Hence the analytical as well as empirical framework is already set and the information acquired through studies is simply entered into this predetermined framework. New catchwords are quickly absorbed – gender, livelihoods, hard core poor, sustainability – but the role they come to play in research is often superficial. They are added on to an established working order instead of allowing for in-depth and inquisitive enquiries. Sarah White concludes that reports concerning gender issues, often funded by foreign aid, provide information rather than analyses (White, 1999). She argues that development research in general, not only that related to gender, is characterized by positivism rather than a hermeneutic approach aimed at understanding the dynamics of society and social change.

In the case of participation and empowerment in development a majority of the literature presents discussions that are linked to the advocacy of these concepts. The starting point is a conviction that participation can and should be made to work and analyses are characterized by a management- and fixing-approach. Although the literature presents insightful and critical analysis of participation, the critique is mostly elaborated on with the intent of *improving* definitions and methods. These debates aim at prescribing the use of participation, resulting in texts devoted to increasingly detailed clarifications of concepts and methods related to participatory strategies. In other words, the analyses lack in what Berger sees as essential for sociology, i.e. a skeptical attitude which will question the taken for granted, which in this case is that participation in development can be made to work so that democratic empowerment of the poor is achieved. The analyses furthermore have a fondness for detailed descriptions and neglects to ask Asplund's core question 'what does this mean?' in relation to data gathered.

While these analyses are not *useless* they are *pointless*, i.e. a-theoretical. They may however gain sociological value by questioning the taken for granted, i.e. that participation leads to empowerment of the poor and general democracy. Stepping outside the discourse of participation in development we find contesting views of people's participation in democracy in classical social theories (see e.g. Pateman, 1970). These theories present among other things discussions concerning the difficulties in encouraging people to express their views and practice their freedom, and at the same time require people to comply with decisions made by a majority who carry ideas that go counter to your own, and accept decisions that may inflict on your personal freedom. Adding sociological value in this case may also involve an understanding of social psychological aspects of joint decision-making, which reveal that fear of exclusion can make us agree to suggestions that do not conform with our personal beliefs of what is an ultimate solution to a problem (see e.g. Cook & Kothari, 2001).

Through applying different theoretical insights gained in other research areas than 'participation in development' we may capture the core difficulties involved in people's participation. They express essential complexities that do not easily lend themselves to managerial manipulations. A focus on these complexities in themselves, as social phenomenon, rather than immediately tend to how they could be handled practically, allows for a more generous analytical room. In this way, by practicing sociological skeptical thinking, we can question the generally taken for granted as well as our own preconceived ideas. By problematising the data we have at hand we may gain in-depth understanding of the core



dilemmas of participation and thereby see it as a general social phenomenon and not only as a development strategy surrounded by problematic behaviour or structural obstacles.

The discussions on development NGOs carry very similar traits to those of participation and empowerment (see e.g. Chowdhury, 1990; Kramsjö & Wood, 1992; Lovell, 1992; Sillitoe, 2000). Literature often presents valuable descriptions involving historical accounts and contextual relations of NGOs. Debates, which critically investigate the national and international political and economic arenas in which we find NGOs, are equally important. But, again using Asplund's rather strong expression, such descriptions are *pointless*, i.e. they are limited since they only help us to see a problem but they do not help us to understand it better. What furthermore makes discussions on development NGOs problematic is that the detailed descriptions are being elaborated upon with a certain intent, distinguished by advocacy for the inclusion of NGOs as partners and assuming the ideal – i.e. NGOs driven by altruism and commitment to solidarity – is attainable. One example of this is the focus on improved organizational management, of financial issues and of the staff, in order to foster the right attitudes, which is visible both in literature and in the number of management courses offered to NGOs. It is also illustrated by the focus in NGO literature on external forces or inadequate internal reflection as elements endangering the real values of NGOs, and by attempts to identify and separate the bad apples from the true and genuine organizations within the NGO sector. This leads discussions into a direction that is mainly aimed at finding practical solutions to problems that hinder the realization of the goals and values claimed by NGOs. David Lewis describes the literature in the following way:

Its tone, while sometimes critical of the attention currently being given to NGOs, is usually one which documents and suggests the potential of NGOs to transform development process in positive ways.

(Lewis, 1999:3)

*Guided by visions or ideological convictions about how things should be may seriously compromise a sociological analysis, since it risks failing to scrutinize what these visions actually consist of in terms of underlying assumptions. In this particular case, the assumption concerns the values and characteristics associated with development NGOs. Scrutinizing these assumptions would mean posing questions about the dilemmas of altruism – Is altruism possible? What happens when altruistic values become embedded in routines? These questions direct us to rather different inquiries than those that are more practically oriented, focused on how we may restore the true NGO spirit in a growing but morally endangered NGO-sector.*

### **Social engineer, revolutionary leader, or a silent researcher?**

*The task of sociology cannot be discussed without also considering what role the sociologist should take on, and there are distinctively different views on this. The topic has been discussed since the dawn of sociology as an academic discipline. Durkheim, Marx and Weber respectively argued for a sociologist playing the role of a social engineer, an advocate for the oppressed, and an academic who should be as detached as possible from political or any other active mission for social change in society.*

The skeptical attitude identified by Berger as an important trait of sociology is a reflection of his view of the role of the sociologist (Berger, 1966). Berger argues that the sociologist should aim to *understand* society. This does not involve practical work such as engaging in the actual solving of a problem. While the object of study may first appear to be the same for a sociologist and, say, a social worker, their respective aims are different in that the social worker tries to solve what is experienced as a problem in society (e.g. the effects of high divorce rates) and the sociologist investigates sociological problems (i.e. marriage as an institution). Consequently their roles are different. Berger requests that for a sociologist, the attempt to formulate and investigate sociological problems, or social phenomena, should supersede any wish to fulfill practical tasks in society. Berger's position resembles that of Max Weber, who argues for a sociology that should not impose upon society values of what is good or bad. Although Weber uses the term value-free I do not interpret this as Weber saying that the researcher can or should be objective and neutral. Rather, I interpret his argument for a value-free social science as a request similar to that of Berger's, i.e. that the researcher takes on a skeptical attitude towards information and explanation given to her, reflects upon her own

preconceived ideas, and that she avoids taking on the role as a social engineer. It is not the task of the sociologist to present remedies to social problems. However, practitioners may very well use the knowledge produced by sociology in order to deepen an understanding of experienced social problems and then try to solve these problems.

*The argument for such a position, combined with the claims made by sociology – that the knowledge it provides is something more than an understanding and interpretation held by the ordinary citizen – may create the impression that the sociologist is a 'self-appointed superior man' with a right to question people's interpretations of their own lives, as a 'cold manipulator of men' detached from reality (Berger, 1966:20). Consequently, and rightly so, sociologists have been severely criticized for being detached and lacking in both understanding and empathy. As mentioned, such a critique has been met by the development of new methodological approaches, such as action research, ethnomethodology, and emotionalism (see e.g. Gubrium & Holstein, 1997). This brings us back to the question how can engagement and empathy vis à vis reality and the researched be expressed?*

To simply say that skepticism is an essential trait of sociology does not guard against lack of empathy towards the researched, or against lack in responsibility towards sociology's task to gain in-depth understanding of social phenomena. There are different ways of interpreting 'a skeptical attitude' in the context of social science. Kuhn requested loyalty towards the rules of the game, i.e. rules concerning methodology, analysis and presentation of research results, as well as loyalty to certain concepts and theories of a dominating paradigm (Kuhn, 1970). Feyerabend on the other hand argued that the disobedient researcher is a must for science to advance. In a historical review of how new knowledge has been achieved through scientific activities he draws the conclusion that 'insistence on the rules would not have improved matters, it would have arrested practice' (Feyerabend, 1975: x). Feyerabend argued that science should be characterized by criticism and skepticism towards theories and concepts, not by an obligation to confirm what is already known.

Asplund remarks that while in contemporary academic world innovation and the breaking of rules is often praised, when practiced it is sometimes hard to be accepted by the academic community. Robert Chambers, a social scientist whose impact in development studies is well recognized, seems to take a different view on this, claiming that seeking problems and criticizing is indeed the name of the game within social science (Chambers, 1983). The skepticism referred to by Chambers does however not appear to be of a refreshing and innovative kind, i.e. a sign of freeing oneself from obstructing rules and obligations. Skepticism, Chambers argues, has been very valuable in the case of understanding rural development and development interventions. However, skepticism may also be misleading, once it has become the rule of the game since it may serve the interest of personal ambitions related to convenience and promotions of the researcher rather than the object of scientific interest.

Academics are trained to criticise and are rewarded for it. Social scientists in particular are taught to argue to find fault. [...]. Their mental state is evaluative. Their peers, too, award them higher marks for a study which points to bad effects of a project than one which highlights benefits.

(Chambers, 1983:30)

*Referring again to texts on participation and empowerment in development, and on development NGOs, I agree with Chambers. Although they are critical one may say that they display a deceptive skeptical attitude, since their critique is based on predictable themes. Although such studies present critique based on insightful details they are misleading in that they do not elaborate on perspectives that go outside of the given discourse. Hence, skepticism interpreted as inquisitiveness and flexibility, or as in a critical mind towards expectations and preconceived ideas, is lacking.*

### **Engaging with the researched**

*As clearly identified by Berger earlier, the role of a sociologist and that of a social worker is different. Chambers similarly expands his concern about the role and attitude of the researcher to involve the relationship between researcher and those who are being researched. The roles and attitude not only affect the research results from a scientific point of view, but are also related to any potential effects the results may have on those studied:*

For the rural poor to lose less and gain more requires reversals... Reversals require professionals who are explorers and multi-disciplinarians, those who ask, again and again, who will benefit and who will lose from their choices and actions.

(ibid: 168)

*The researcher should not only be skilled in her profession including methodology and theoretical scrutiny, but also be working according to the ethics of putting the last first. In practical terms, the reversal of order entails an ethical guidance based on advocacy for the poor and powerless when choosing research questions, in presenting and being responsible for the use of produced results, and most of all, it implies special methods for gathering data. With conventional methods realities that are of great importance to 'the last', the poor and powerless, risk being missed out. This can be remedied by practicing participatory research in which the researcher not only goes to and experiences life in the field, but also transfers initiative as to what issues to investigate to the people in question.*

As we see, there are considerable differences in perceptions of what role and responsibility the researcher ought to take on, with Berger arguing for a clear separation between the sociologist as a professional academic and a practitioner, and Chamber's request that the academic and the practical should to some extent merge, i.e. the researcher should take on the role which involves a moral obligation to look out for the weak and vulnerable. Behind Chamber's demand lies a call for change in research that would allow for the studied individual to have a voice and thereby inviting new and crucial information to have an impact on theories and policies alike. With that I agree, as well as with Chambers' concerns about a skepticism that has come to serve a rather vacuous role for the advancement of knowledge. Chambers' proposition goes one step further though, when he suggests that the researcher should actively advocate for 'the last'.

The way I see it interpreting the concept of an engaged researcher as being the same as taking on the role of an advocate for the poor in the research process will jeopardize a sociological approach which aims at providing a perspective that is wider than the one expressed by the single individual, and of generating new knowledge without having preconceived ideas about what this knowledge should consist of or lead to. Rejecting the role of an advocate does however not at all mean that a review of research methodology should not be called for. In what is often termed a feminist approach, closeness is emphasized rather than a striving for distance in relation to both topic and the researched, something which should be seen as a challenge for a research area that has been dominated by large scale surveys and structural analysis. Nor does a rejection of calls for taking on an advocate's role, or merging research with remedy-seeking assignments lead us to a position in which the researcher is disengaged. Ferguson summarizes this very well, commenting on his own position in relation to his study of development projects in Lesotho:

*The fact that this study does not aim to rectify or correct 'development' thinking is not a sign of some sort of improbable indifference or neutrality; it simply reflects my view that in tracing the political intelligibility of the 'development' problematic, the question of the truth or falsity of 'development' is not the central one.*

(Ferguson, 1996:xv)

*By aiming at understanding the phenomenon studied along the lines proposed by Asplund, and by being aware of the dangers of bias inherent in any kind of research process, the researcher takes on both responsibility and an engaged attitude towards her work. An argument for giving room to sociological questions and inquisitiveness, and for marking a difference between the role of the researcher and the development practitioner, does not have to imply a distance between academia and reality. Being engaged and taking responsibility as a researcher does not need to be related to a consciously chosen position that involves an active advocacy for 'the last' or any other group. An analysis of the kind argued for here should not be interpreted as indifferent to either the field or topic studied.*

### **Concluding remarks**

*The challenges faced by sociology in the context of development studies involve expectations to take on a role of a practitioner, being it a social worker or a policy maker. While it is crucial to acknowledge and understand the concrete problems in people's everyday lives, as well as frustration over failed*

*operationalisation of development projects, as a sociologist one should be careful not to be caught in a role aimed at delivering solutions to problems as experienced and identified in the field. A remedy-seeking assignment differs quite considerably from a theoretical academic investigation. While a practitioner is looking for problems to solve, the sociologist has a wider interest in social phenomenon that may not at all present themselves as 'problems' as defined from a development project's point of view.*

Rejecting the role of a social worker or policy maker should not be interpreted as the sociologist is indifferent to urgent problems people experience, or that sociology is only remotely related to reality. Through being engaged as a researcher in the tasks of sociology as defined here means taking on both responsibility and empathy in relation to the researched. Through being engaged in such a way, through bringing an inquisitive sociology back in, I believe knowledge can be produced that ultimately can be used to the benefit the recipients of development projects. A sociological inquiry will deliver better understanding of people's lives, priorities and perceptions of the world, and better understanding of what influences the interplay between local reality and development projects.

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## Shifting Paradigms of Development

**Review of** *Unnayanchintar Palabodol* (Transitions in Development Theory): S. Aminul Islam. Dhaka: Dibyaprakash.

With the concept of development fragmented into numerous issue-based growth ideas like environment, women or gender, population etc., a comprehensive theory of development has faltered over the last few decades. Yet, the scholars over the years have sought to make sense of the problems faced by the Third world in particular and have ventured into various modes of explanations. Some of these have been followed in policy prescriptions while others have sought to demonstrate their inadequacies. Yet others have prescribed revolutionary transformation of the society. Most, however, have been proposed in relation to this or that ideology and as a result have failed to offer a unified and unbiased notion of development or a way out for the Third world countries.

Few books have been able to capture this range of issues and ideas associated with development and/or its theories particularly with a clear notion of the historical growth of these. And there is none in Bengali. The absence is felt most in teaching the subject to the students of development. S. Aminul Islam is one teacher who decided to face the issue directly by writing a book that could remedy the problem. And in trying to wrestle with the various opposing ideas of development, he has come up with an excellent analysis of the changing scenario by placing these in relation to the now famous notion of "paradigm shift". By following Kuhn, Islam has worked out an explanation of development theories that offers not only a basis for their analysis but also places these in a coherent order, a categorization of vital importance, which alone can make any sense of the contending perspectives.

Beginning with the explanation of the basic concepts like "progress", "evolution" and "development" Islam traces the whole history of the growth of development theory to their current ideas. Although he touches on the initial explanations of the economists his focus is on the sociological perspective. Identifying the basis of most of the theories in the works of Weber, Durkheim, Spencer and Marx, Islam shows how they all culminated in the theories of the past decades like the modernization theory, the dependency theory and the various neo-Marxist theories.

The most penetrating presentation is his analysis of the "modernization" theory. He aptly calls the chapter on modernization as "the rise and fall of a paradigm" and traces the growth and development of the various aspects of the modernization theory and then goes on to show their inadequacies and how modernization failed as a paradigm of development. It was one of his earlier works on modernization theory that prompted him to use Kuhn and the notion of paradigm to evaluate the modernization perspective on development. In this work he again uses Kuhn to show how the "crisis" which followed in the wake of the failure of the modernization paradigm gave rise to the later theories. Thus, in many ways Islam bases much of his analysis of the development theories, particularly the dependency theory, as a response to the modernization paradigm.

Yet, his treatment of the dependency theory remains as the strongest point of the book. Here he offers one of the most comprehensive analysis of dependency theory that is to be found anywhere. He shows how from the 1950s on ward dependency paradigm developed in Latin America and how Frank brought it to the forefront of development analysis. Islam also deals extensively with the "world system" theory of Wallerstein, Samir Amin and theories of many neo-Marxists to complement his examination of the responses to the modernization paradigm.

The later chapters of the book focus on the recent developments including providing an interesting critique of the dependency paradigm. He also seeks to portray the growth of the mass

media and how it influences development, arguing that although the concept of “cultural imperialism” is yet to make its mark in sociology, it needs to be seen as a new facet of Western domination. He then shifts to the more recent aspects of globalizaion. This, I feel, is not a very well developed chapter. The reason may be simply that very little work has done on it by the sociologists. In any case this chapter needs further elaboration at least by looking at the numerous criticisms that have been launched against globalization and the WTO. Islam then rounds off with a very thought provoking section on “post-development” thinking, which I am sure will allow the reader to develop his/her own perspective on development.

The book, to say the least, is a very welcome publication. There is nothing comparable available in Bengali and few English volumes are as comprehensive. As the author notes, it will be of great service to both the academics and the researchers in the field. I feel an immediate translation into English is in order as the book goes far beyond being just another text on development. I see it as a major contribution to the understanding of the vital issue of development as well as an attempt at unraveling of the complex process of theory building in the area.

**Nazrul Islam**