

TOWARDS A RECONCEPTUALIZATION OF POVERTY: IMPLICATIONS FOR ITS ERADICATION AND POLICY

Emmanuel Siziba,¹ Jephias Mapuva,*²

¹ Department of Sustainable Development, Bindura University of Science Education,
P.O. Box 1020 Bindura, Zimbabwe. Email: ersamaita@gmail.com

² Professor, Department of Sustainable Development, Bindura University of Science
Education, P.O. Box 1020 Bindura, Zimbabwe. Email: mapuva@gmail.com

*Corresponding author: mapuva@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

The success of any poverty alleviation strategy depends partly on how poverty is conceptualized. The overarching goal of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development is “Ending poverty in all its forms everywhere” and this demonstrates the need to conceptualize poverty beyond not only monetary dimensions but also considering it as an experience and a strategy on which other peoples’ lifestyles depends on. To improve the understanding of the multi-dimensional aspects of poverty the article proposes that poverty can be grouped into three dimensions namely: moral, material and social. By restricting the access to resources by those who lack them, those with political, economic and social power exhibit moral poverty. Targeting moral poverty is the key strategy to eliminate all forms of poverty.

INTRODUCTION

Poverty, as a persistent and deeply rooted social and cultural problem, has affected many people and has been debated for centuries (Ravallion 2011) and manifest itself in forms such as lack of income; unsecure livelihoods; chronic hunger and nutrition; homelessness; lack of durable goods; lack of access to clean water; lack of education; low life expectancy; discrimination; unemployment; high rates of infant and maternal mortality and lack of participation in decision making (World Bank 1990, Sneyd 2015). Sustained evidence suggest that poverty exist in all countries but extreme poverty is more widespread in Sub Saharan Africa (SSA) and South Asia (World Bank 2014, Hamel, Tong & Hofer 2019). In these countries lack of infrastructure; pursuit of economic policies that exclude the poor; lack of access to the markets and inadequate income earning opportunities; disjointed public support for social protection and exploitation of the poor by political and religious elites are the chief causes of poverty (Avoo 2021). From the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) to the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (SDGs) poverty eradication is arguably the most important development goal. To this end the frequency, with which reducing, alleviating or elimination of poverty should be seen as a measure of development (Chambers 2006). Poverty eradication was the first of the MDGs and after a decade and half it was named again as the first SDG. Its centrality in the current development agenda demonstrate the elusiveness of dealing with poverty as a social ill that affect millions globally.

Poverty alleviation programmes depends on how poverty is conceptualized. Although poverty is a multi-dimensional phenomenon, poverty alleviation strategies all over the world are predominantly aimed at reducing the number of people living on less than \$1.25 per day which stood at 1.2 billion in 2010 Heeks (2014). The conceptualization of poverty using economic and consumption dimensions based on income is at the centre of poverty today. However, despite progress in other aspects of development poverty eradication efforts have been “too few, too slow and inept” (Agola & Awange 2013). In the analysis of Isbister (2006) development agenda has been criticized for not delivering what it is expected of in terms of economic growth, political freedom, poverty reduction and social change. In relation to these development dimensions the situation is dire in low to medium income countries. The aim of this paper is the review the way poverty is conceptualized, existing reduction strategies and suggest an alternative conceptualization in order to deal with these multi-dimensional phenomena.

CONCEPTUALIZATION OF POVERTY

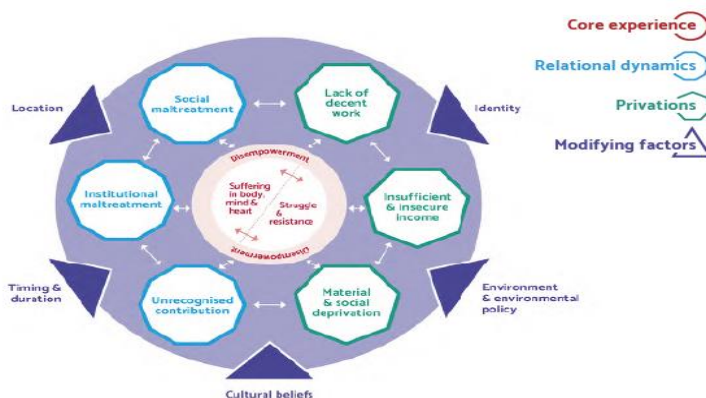
Poverty is a dynamic multidimensional concept that vary from place to place, season to season, between generations and can be internalized lived experience where individuals end up accepting their conditions. Poverty levels are often measured using economic dimensions based on income and consumption (World Bank 2015) as well as a social proxy measured

in access to education, health facilities and other services (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change 2014). Amartya Sen capability deprivation sees poverty as the inability to acquire certain minimum capabilities. The capabilities approach acknowledges that poverty is experienced as a lack of control and the acquiring of capabilities ensures that options and choices are not limited by economic and social circumstances.

What poverty means depends on who ask the question and answer it. According to UNDP (2006) poverty has five clusters of meaning namely income poverty, material lack or want, capability deprivation derived from Amartya Sen, multidimensional concept of ill-being (e.g. powerlessness, insecurity etc.) as well the definition of poverty by people who experience the phenomena. The fifth cluster has multiple meanings and is often ignored in the definition and description of poverty with dire consequences for policy formulation and eradication of the social ill. The web of poverty's disadvantages reveals many types of poverties and deprivations. In the analysis of UNDP (2006) poverty manifest itself in the form of lack of education, poverty of time, poor social relations, an array of insecurities as well as physical ill-being. The poverty of time is a situation where an individual has no option to do anything except what she/he is currently doing. For example, poor people engage in economic activities without engaging in leisure activities. Poor people are prone to flipping from assets to liability and the conditions of many is often associated with insecurity, worry, anxiety and powerlessness (UNDP 2006). Indeed, it is relational and systemic ranging from change in individual practices and often to altered institutional arrangement (Jerneck 2015). In the context of changing individual practices poor people often face unthinkable choices and altered institutional arrangements may mean retrenchments, non-payment of wages or rising inflation.

In a study that covered six countries and involving people who experience poverty, Bray et al (2019) concluded that the complexity of poverty is best understood in three interrelated sets of dimensions. To them poverty is a multidimensional concept that is measured in terms of Core experience (disempowerment; suffering in body, mind and heart; struggle and resistance); relational dynamics (institutional and social maltreatment; unrecognized contribution) as well as Privation (an array of lacks and deprivations (Bray et al 2019). As shown in figure 1 the experience of poverty is modified by five factors: identity; timing and duration; location; environment and environmental policy and cultural beliefs (Bray et al 2019).

Figure 1: Multi dimensions of poverty



Source: Bray et al (2019): 13

Disempowerment, defined as a lack of control and dependency on others due to constrained choices (Bray et al 2019) ignite multiple suffering by people living in poverty and the suffering is not adequately captures in current multidimensional poverty indices. It is a multifaceted lived experience involving individual, cognitive and emotional experience (Olsson & Jerneck 2010). The negative experience of poverty exacerbated by economic, political, religious and social institutions that ill-treat and manipulate people. It is clear that poverty is not fixed in time and no single definition or dimension can capture it. According to Jonsson et al (2012) poverty shift between seasons and settings, can be a life cycle phenomenon for some and vary across gender and generations. As such poverty reduction strategies should involve complex political, economic, religious and social initiatives and interventions that take into account the realities of people experiencing poverty.

POVERTY ERADICATION STRATEGIES

Poverty eradication strategies globally are aimed at reducing the poverty of the poor and vulnerable communities through participatory and community driven approaches (Chakrabarti & Dhar 2013). Studies have shown that economic growth is an instrument for poverty reduction among the poor through employment. Between 1970 and 2000 studies show that economic growth lifted a number of poor people out of poverty in Africa, Brazil, China and Indonesia (World Development Report 2001). However due to poverty majority may not access productive employment due to lack of skills. Although economic growth provide more choices for people to improve their lives, it may tilt in favor of the non-poor (Sen 2000) resulting in exploitation of the poor. To this end social strategies to help the poor are handy and economic development rather than economic growth is a principal instrument for poverty eradication. However, in the analysis of Bhagwati & Panagariya (2012) economic growth provide financial resources for supporting poverty alleviation strategies. This is

possible when societies embrace economic development strategies which promote fair distribution of resources based of governance principles that are sensitive to the needs of the vulnerable members of the community.

Access to microfinance especially in low to medium income countries (LMICs) empowers the poor women by supporting their income generating projects raising their entrepreneurial spirit thereby reducing their vulnerability (World Bank 2007, Wright 2000, Benerjee & Jackson 2017, Das & Bhowal 2013). However for microfinance to be effective access to this facility need to be availed in the context where the recipients has skills, access to technology as well as strategies related to education and health (Mwenda & Muuka 2004, Nawaz 2010, Montgomery & Weiss 2011). Since poverty is a multidimensional concept economic growth and microfinance have effect on financial poverty but fails to reflect on cultural, social psychological dimensions of poverty (Benerjee & Jackson 2017). These dimensions especially cultural and social may constrain women from accessing microfinance and fully benefit from economic growth. Amartya Sen cites social exclusion and capability deprivation as causes for poverty. To this end poverty alleviation programmes should focus on maximizing the individual's ability to expand one's freedom of choices (Sen 1993) thus facilitating the social security of the poor in the development discourse.

Social security, an instrument for addressing gender inequality and vulnerability, is a set of public actions that aim to reduce risk and deprivations (Elkins 2014). It is a means to achieve gender parity since it premised on the principle that men and women enjoy equal sovereignty in economic, social and political activities. However, opposition to gender equality, women's rights activism has become more vocal and global with actors that include religious groups, right wing populists and anti-gender ideology movement (Bod 2012, Kuhar 2015, Verloo 2018) threatening to reverse to gains of empowerment that started at the International Conference on Population and Development (1994) as well as the Beijing conference (1995). Spending on social protection that include social insurance schemes, social assistance payments as well as the provision of social services directed towards the poor are poverty alleviation strategies that are known to create social safety nets (World Bank 1990, Khan & Arefin 2013, Ahmed et al 2014). However due to economic challenges in many LMICs the sustainability of social safety nets as poverty protection programmes is problematic (Khan & Arefin 2013). Economic challenges coupled with poor governance in the area of poverty makes eradication a distant dream. To this end good governance approach with regards to poverty is a prerequisite for LMICs. Vulnerability of the poor increases in LMICs where their economic challenges, rigid cultural and religious norms as well as fragile and nascent democracies.

ALTERNATIVE CONCEPTUALIZATION OF POVERTY

Poverty is a dynamic phenomenon that denotes a lack and a deprivation in multiple ways. It is a deprivation of a diverse nature of resources that are

needed to sustain life as well as restricted of lack of choices and means to get the resources. As a result of lack of choices poor people have no say in decision taken for them by those in authority and compliance induced dependence results in dehumanization and loss of personal dignity on the part of the poor. Although it may be evident that someone is poor through observable deprivations, it is difficult to understand the suffering in body, heart and mind felt by the poor. While the experience of poverty is unique it is the struggle to survive by the poor that make them vulnerable to the society through exploitation, abuse, coercion, ridicule and maltreatment. For many, lack of human capabilities (education, nutrition and health) means that the majority of the poor people struggle through the entire life and their children maybe caught in the vicious cycle of poverty. This paper suggests alternative ways to classify poverty. Poverty eradication depends on how poverty is conceptualized. To this end poverty is seen to consist of three major dimensions as shown in table 1.

Table 1: Dimension of poverty

Dimension of Poverty	Characteristics
Moral poverty	Corruption, abuse of power b institutions and individuals, nature of governance that relates to poverty
Material Poverty	Lack of income, insecure income, lack of access to material resources, multilevel experience of poverty, economic vulnerability, struggle to survive, insecure livelihoods
Social Poverty	Negative prejudicial judgement, lack of friends, dependence on others that is dehumanizing, social vulnerability, lack of belief in self

Moral Poverty

Moral poverty is lack or perceived lack of concern for human life and self-centred actions meant to systematically deprive people of choices to sustain their lives. It is the type of poverty associated with people with economic, political, social and religion power. Moral poverty puts to test the moral compass of the society as those in power choose between profits and people. In many countries institutions mandated to deal with poverty often failed to do so or tend to provide solution that deepen poverty through chronic dependence. In many settings it may mean living with the consequences of persistent corruption, looting and government failure to enforce existing policies and laws that address poverty in particular and human welfare in general. The unfair distribution of resources and services is increasingly related to rise of illiberal democracies which are taking shape in many parts of the world. Illiberal democracy covers countries that still adhere to the forms and rituals of democracy such as elections but whose actual practice like free and fair elections, civil and political liberties and the rule of law is questionable (Nyyssonen &

Metsala, 2012). For government officials, company executives, church leaders and even community leaders the engagement in corrupt activities demonstrate that they are morally poor yet this type of poverty is hidden in poverty indices and policies. Indeed, we are living in a society that design programmes to eradicate poverty yet creating conditions for it to flourish. On one hand many societies condemn poverty and on the other those in power engage in activities that condemn many to poverty. Without targeting moral poverty strategies to alleviate this type of social ill are likely to fail. The world through the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) failed to eradicate poverty and through the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) poverty eradication is problematic unless the dimensions are clearly identified and moral poverty is a key dimension.

For personal or institutional gain, government officials in many parts of the world preside over deteriorating economies, in areas with conflicts, where aid is blocked to reach the poor. In other settings religious leaders often brainwash their congregants whose incomes are already insecure to give money as 'seed money' to the church. In all these scenarios many people do not have choices to act otherwise. As a result of lack of choices poor people have no say in decision taken for them by those in authority and the compliance and induced dependent result in dehumanization and loss of personal identity. Moral poverty is the type of poverty where those in it enjoy and constantly find ways to maintain the status quo through change in constitutions, strategically positioning themselves in churches or rigging elections to remain in power. Company executives while seeking to increase production try by all means to cut on production costs with wages being the target as negotiations to increase salaries can be met with intimidation of workers' unions. In many settings especially in LMICs people are systematically underpaid leading to insecure income and chronic poverty.

Material Poverty

Material poverty is defined as lack of essential resources and services meant to sustain life as well as restricted or lack of alternatives to achieve the resources. These include food, clothing, housing, sanitation, clean water, reliable energy supply, security, non-discriminatory education, effective health care and efficient public transport. Lack of access can be current or continuous. The current lack of access refers to low levels of income and other services that fail to meet the immediate needs of individuals or family like food while continuous lack of access to resources and services refers to absence of decent means of activities to generate sustained levels of income. To the poor this means struggle to get a meal and lack of decent work for sustainable flow of income. Economic activities like subsistence farming, brick molding, selling of firewood and a diverse nature vending (selling of vegetables, tomatoes, fruits and selected food items) do not generate income to sustain life. In many settings especially in LMICs these are the faces of poverty which denotes suffering and struggle for life.

Moral poverty (for example those which economic power) often clash with material poverty (for example those without income) to produce undesirable situations for the whole society. Those with economic power can lure women without financial resources into sexual relationships which facilitates the spread of HIV and sexually transmitted diseases (STDs). Women are offered more cash for unprotected sex and even if they are aware of the dangers, they often opt for cash due limited alternatives to get income. The rapid spread of HIV in Sub Saharan Africa (SAA) was partly due to the interaction of moral and material poverties and not just poverty. Human trafficking for the purpose of prostitution and sexual abuses at work and in some churches, indicate the interaction of moral and material dimensions of poverty. People without income develop a high affinity for money which affect their objectivity when it comes to how they get the money thus making them vulnerable to various abuses.

Social poverty

Social poverty is a way poor people are viewed in the society such that it negatively affects the way they access resources and other opportunities to sustain life. It is the type of poverty people experience as a result of lack of resources needed to sustain life in addition to the effects of lacking. This shows that material poverty leads to social poverty demonstrating that the multidimensionality of poverty is not only in causes but also in experience. Poor people suffer from negative prejudicial judgement by the society. They are seen as people who can accept anything when they sell their labor leading to them been offered low wages. The perception that people poor especially women can accept anything for money increases the risk of sexual abuses at work places either as domestic workers or in the formal sectors when women work under men. Domestic workers in LIMCs who often work long hours, without taking off days are the epitome of abuse and exploitation. People experiencing poverty are often stigmatized and discriminated against by relatives and other members of the society based on stereotypes and ignorance. When this social maltreatment (negative perception about people in poverty the society) persist, people experiencing poverty develop low self-esteem and end up accepting risk jobs or economic activities that endanger their health as well as adding to their insecurity. When people experiencing poverty belong to groups that are treated negatively based on gender, disability, ethnicity and religious status the stigma becomes cumulative.

Guide by the human principle of resourcefulness, people living in poverty find ways to create economic activities or services that enable them to contribute to socioeconomic well-being of their families. However, because of social maltreatment societies do not place any value to the efforts by the poor. To this end people experiencing poverty may underestimate their knowledge, skills and potential. Overall poor people feel demotivated and may not have the inner zeal to better their knowledge and skills.

Levels of material and social poverty can be made worse by religious and cultural beliefs. These beliefs affect both the way poverty is defined, understood and treated. For example, for Christians Proverbs 19 verse 7 states that “a poor man is shunned by all his relatives, how much more his friends avoid him”. While there are other portions in the bible that encourage helping the poor those that stick to this verse may not help their poor relatives. Cultural beliefs create financial expectations like the need to buy a coffin for the dead putting pressure on poor families who struggle to put food on the table. It defines the nature of economic activities for the people (including those in poverty). For the poor the propensity to engage in superstitious activities for example visiting the traditional healers and prophets in the hope to becoming rich is high. In many cases the poor are swindled of the little cash they have or end up on the collision path with relatives who often accuse them of witchcraft. Thus, cultural and religious beliefs, socioeconomic realities of the society and the individual together with institutional frameworks define the poor people’ s struggle to survive and how they are treated.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The aim of development projects and poverty alleviation programmes the world over is to reduce poverty of the poor and vulnerable communities through participatory and community driven approaches. The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) agenda aim to end poverty and ‘*Ending poverty in all its forms everywhere*’ is the first of the 17 SDGs. This shows that poverty alleviation and its elimination depend on the correct identification of the forms of poverty. The study identified moral, material and social dimensions of poverty which are closely interrelated. While material and social aspects of poverty are experienced by the people who lack resources and ill-treated by the society, moral poverty is associated with people with economic, social, political and religious power. It is associated with privileges. For material and social dimensions of poverty, it is an experience but for moral poverty it is a lifestyle that is enjoyed by those with power while making it difficult for other to meaningfully access resources and other opportunities for sustain life. Dealing with moral poverty like nuclear energy is a delicate bargain between capitalism and human welfare. Capitalism is premised on the desire to make profits and this can trigger unethical strategies like corruption, bad cooperate governance, political intimidation during elections and religious brainwashing by those in different circles of power. For those who lack resources it creates dependency, anticipation, struggle, suffering, limited choices and acceptance of their conditions.

Recommendations

Poverty is a complex multidimensional concept that cause pain and suffering to some while presenting a lifeline for those in power. It cannot be addressed by policies that target specific dimensions. Rather:

- Based on good governance, all policies should mainstream all forms of poverty chief of which should be moral poverty.
- Need to develop context specific indicators for moral poverty. Changes in statistical systems are needed to capture these indicators.
- Holding governments, churches, cooperate organizations and civil organizations accountable.
- Empowerment of negatively perceived groups based on gender, ethnicity, place of residence, religion and those living with disability.

While it is the thrust of the international community through the SDGs to end all forms of poverty everywhere, the focus should be on those with economic, political and religious power to create a conducive environment to lessen the suffering of those who lack material resources. Poverty has two main dimension: those that are suffering (material and social poverty) and those enjoying at the expense of others (moral poverty). The provision of sustained access to resources to those who do not have this access remains the collective sight for communities and societies to reduce the suffering of people in poverty (material and social) while reminding those with an array of privileges (moral poverty) that economic, environmental and social sustainability are three pillars of development that humanity can achieve when all have access to resources. Dealing with material and social poverties without dealing with moral poverty fit in the current strategies that those in power together with academics document lack of income, come up with poverty indices, statistics of how many people are living on less than \$1US dollar per day, identify countries with extreme poverty, come up with strategies to deal with poverty as well as organizing seminars and workshops to discuss poverty. Glaringly moral poverty is not part of the discussion. It is the realization that those who have unlimited access to resources and power that they are morally poor if they do not create a conducive environment for all to lead a decent life, which should mark a major step towards poverty eradication. The definition of poverty that include moral poverty is needed for development policy focusing on poverty eradication.

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