



HOLISTIC UNDERSTANDING OF POVERTY



ACCI RELIEF

5 / 2-4 SARTON ROAD,
CLAYTON VIC 3168, AUSTRALIA
Phone: +61 3 8516 9600
Email: info@accir.org.au

CHALLENGING ASSUMPTIONS ABOUT POVERTY

The international aid and development sector comprises of numerous actors ranging from international aid agencies, international non-government organisations, local non-government organisations, community-based organisations, foundations, social enterprises, missions agencies, local churches and individuals from all walks of life. This diverse group of actors from all corners of the world unite around a common goal; the eradication or alleviation of poverty. How each of us engage in poverty eradication/alleviation will directly correspond to our understanding of poverty, therefore unpacking the notion of poverty is the starting point to developing a holistic and effective strategy to addressing poverty.

WHAT DOES POVERTY MEAN TO US?

If you were to take a piece of paper and write down a definition of poverty, what would it be? How would it be measured? Based on what criteria would you determine someone to be determined poor?

Below are some common definitions of poverty taken from several sources:

“The state or condition of having little money, goods or means of support”. *Source: dictionary.com*

“Poverty is the deprivation of common necessities such as food, clothing, shelter and safe drinking water, all of which determine our quality of life. It may also include the lack of access to opportunities such as education and employment, which aid the escape from poverty and/or allow one to enjoy the respect of fellow citizens”.

Source: Wikipedia

“Poverty is a condition characterized by severe deprivation of basic human needs, including food, safe drinking water, sanitation facilities, health, shelter, education and information. It depends not only on income but also on access to services. It includes a lack of income and productive resources to ensure sustainable livelihoods; hunger and malnutrition; ill health; limited or lack of access to education and other basic services; increased morbidity and mortality from illness; homelessness and inadequate housing; unsafe environments and social discrimination and exclusion. It is also characterized by lack of participation in decision making and in civil, social and cultural life”. *Source: World Summit on Social Development*

“Extreme poverty – less than \$1 per day” (poverty line) *Source: UN*

“Absolute poverty- unable to meet basic needs such as food, clothing, shelter” (expressed as a \$ or calorie per day figure) *Source: UN*

“Relative poverty- falling below the prevailing standards of living in a societal context”. *Source: UN*

HOW DO THOSE LIVING IN POVERTY DEFINE THEIR POVERTY?

The above definitions define poverty primarily on the basis of economic indicators. Such objective definitions fail to recognise the lived experiences of the poor and the social, psychological and spiritual aspects of poverty. A legitimate definition of poverty therefore should go beyond the indicators and thresholds and include the voices and experience of the poor themselves. The following quotes are definitions of poverty taken from the World Bank's voices of the poor series.

Poverty is humiliation, the sense of being dependent on them, and of being forced to accept rudeness, insults, and indifference when we seek help”. *Latvia 1998*

“Poverty is lack of freedom, enslaved by crushing daily burden, by depression and fear of what the future will bring”. *Georgia 1997*

“I think poverty is something that begins at birth. Some people are unlucky from the day they're born. They'll never go anywhere in the world”. *Brazil 1995*

“You have to cultivate networks and contacts with people with power and influence to secure a livelihood and future”. *Pakistan 1993*

“I have become like a stray dog whimpering in front of the closed doors of relatives in the hope that someone might open the door”. *A mother of two, Georgia 1997*

“For a poor person everything is terrible — illness, humiliation, shame. We are cripples; we are afraid of everything; we depend on everyone. No one needs us. We are like garbage that everyone wants to get rid of”. *Blind woman from Tiraspol, Moldova 1997*

“The poor person has to exist so he can serve the great one, the rich. God made things like that”. *Brazil 1995*

“The poor live at the whim and mercy of nature”. *Kenya, 1997*

DIFFERENCE IN DEFINITION

The technical definitions of poverty emanating from the west stand in stark contrast to the voices of those living in poverty in non-western countries. Our Eurocentric definitions of poverty are a product of our western culture, which is dominated by capitalism, materialism and individualism. These are all products of the prevailing ideology in the west; neoliberalism, which considers poverty an economic problem categorised by a lack of material goods and resources caused by an inability to generate sufficient income and access services. Neoliberalism sees poverty as an individual problem rather than rooted in structural inequality. It assumes that quality of life is predominately related to the ability of an individual to meet their material needs, and ignores the importance of relationships and social cohesion.

Our western worldview is also highly compartmentalised and we believe that the physical, social and spiritual domains of life are separated and unrelated. As such we struggle to see past the economic impacts poverty. In contrast, the perspectives of those living in poverty reveal the psychological and relational/social nature of poverty. Whilst the definitions drawn from the voices of the poor recognise the hardship caused by a lack of resource, they predominantly define their poverty in terms of powerlessness, lack of freedom, inequality, dependency and psychological factors such as shame, humiliation, fear, depression and fatalism.

If these are the defining aspects of poverty, how does it change how we approach poverty alleviation? Can initiatives developed out of our western understanding of poverty (material lack requiring increased access to material goods) truly address poverty? Could our assumptions in fact compound the poor? Both past and present impacts of development initiatives demonstrate that good intentions without critical reflection can harm the communities we seek to help. It is therefore essential that we approach poverty alleviation from a holistic and ethnographic perspective.

POVERTY AND POWERLESSNESS

One of the defining and most debilitating aspects of material poverty is the lack of power to choose and act upon choices that those living in material poverty experience. Understanding this is critical to developing holistic solutions that actually can transform - not just band-aid poverty. If our poverty alleviation efforts don't give people choice and empower those living in material poverty, then we've failed to effect transformational and sustainable change because we have not addressed poverty from a root cause level. This is why it is critical that we don't come in as the experts and impose an agenda on communities, try to fix communities or force them to conform to western notions of modernity and 'civilisation'. We should never assume we have all the solutions and understand their context and issues without seeking their opinion and perspective. It is the community members themselves who should determine the vision for their own lives, families and community.

When we prescribe 'development' to a community, we are not reinstating equality; we are actually operating out of sense of superiority where we believe we know best. If the low sense of self worth and lack of choice the poor experience is defining aspect of their poverty, then our distorted sense of superiority, which leads to a prescriptive approach to 'development' will deepen their poverty rather than alleviate it.

Bryant Meyers (2011) defines poverty as the opposite to peace, which exists wherever there is a broken relationship between humankind and God, creation, each other (community) or ourselves (self-image). As such poverty can be experienced as social poverty, spiritual poverty, physical poverty and poverty of self. Myers highlights the detriment of a narrow Eurocentric economic understanding of poverty stating that:

When we limit our understanding of poverty this way, we see ourselves as providers. The poor are passive recipients, incomplete human beings who we make whole. This unwittingly has two negative consequences firstly; this attitude demeans and devalues the poor. Our view of them, which quickly becomes their view of themselves, is that they are defective and inadequate. Second our attitude about ourselves becomes messianic. We are tempted to believe we are the deliverers of the poor and that we make their lives complete. (Meyers 2011 p.)

Therefore if we seek to eradicate poverty, we must go beyond economic fixes and seek to reinstate peace and equality in personal and structural relationships. We must empower people and recognise their right to choose and self determine the course of their own future. We must respect and reinstate their dignity and self worth through recognising their own capacity to use their skills and experiences to develop their communities. We must engage in two-way learning rather than positioning ourselves as the experts and saviours and we must be willing to change the aspects of our own culture and behaviours that create poverty such as excessive consumerism, individualism and privatisation. Out of a new and holistic understanding we must change the way we approach development.

DEVELOPMENT AS EMPOWERMENT

Just as we began by challenging our assumptions about poverty, so must we reflect on and challenge our assumptions about the nature of development.

Ask yourself this question. Is development something done:

A: TO THE COMMUNITY B: WITH THE COMMUNITY C: BY THE COMMUNITY

What difference does the word do, with or by make in that sentence?

TO	The community are passive recipients of whatever 'development' external 'experts' determine they need.	This is indicative of a welfare approach that can disempower people, create dependency and compound the psychological aspects of poverty.
WITH	The community are active participants who along with community development practitioners have some level of involvement in the development activities.	This is indicative of participatory partnerships however the power usually remains in the hands of the development practitioners who determine the agenda and engage the community in activities targeting needs/problems they have predetermined.
BY	The community is empowered to self-determine the course and nature of their own development	This is indicative of empowerment as the end goal of development. The community determine the goals, decide on the approach to achieving the goals and may invite external organisations to partner with them on meeting the gaps in their resource or knowledge base. It addresses the root causes of poverty by affirming the worth, equality and capacity of the community and gives them choices, decision making power and control over their own lives.

WHAT IS EMPOWERMENT?

Empowerment is a process of assisting a community and/or members of a community to regain power over decisions and actions that have a direct impact on their lives and wellbeing. Empowerment is about enabling communities to participate in sites of power and facilitating transfers of power in favour of the marginalized members of a community/society. This directly relates to addressing the non-material aspects of poverty, which include lack of control over one's life, lack of opportunity to make meaningful choices and affect change and lack of voice. All of these psychological aspects of poverty relate to unequal access to sites of power, and both local and systemic obstacles to participating in those sites of power. As communities are empowered to self-determine the course and nature of development in their own lives, they are participating in local sites of power. Through this experience they gain the confidence to progress to participating in external sites of power, and thus challenge inequity in systems operating at a national and global level. This confidence and experience of having power to effect change further addresses fatalism, which in many cases is the result of internalizing inequality and subsequent distorted self-worth. Development that fails to adequately assist communities to address power inequality will fail to address the root causes of poverty-based issues and fail to address low self-confidence and self-worth. This severely limits the ability of the development initiatives to achieve sustainable impacts in the lives of community members, as both local and systemic oppression will continue to exert a negative influence on the most marginalized members of the community.

EMPOWERMENT CASE STUDY: CAMBODIAN FOOTBALL FIELD

Phnom Cheso is a rural area of Takeo where a local church network had established churches and cell groups out of which they were facilitating development with the broader community. This process began by holding community planning sessions where the community determined their goals, priorities and how they wanted to approach reaching their goals with the assets they primarily have available to them. This resulted in community development plans that became the basis of the church and a local NGO's on-going engagement with the community.

In the first community planning sessions held with the Phnom Cheso community, they determined that their greatest need and highest priority was a football field. From the local NGO's perspective the greatest problem was the incredibly high infant mortality rate - almost double the national rate, which was largely due to a lack of access to clean water and unhygienic practices. The local NGO was hoping that the community would choose to address this issue, but alas the community chose a football field. Based on the local NGO's commitment to community-led development they kept their opinions and perceptions to themselves and supported the community in organising how they could work together to make a football field. Together they developed the plans, identified the resources, divided up the tasks and the community achieved their goal and created a football field. The local NGO initially walked away feeling like the whole exercise was a massive failure.

When they next visited that community, which was after some time, the local NGO staff were shocked to see that many families had water filters in their home and that a highly contaminated common water source that both people and animals drank from and bathed in had been fenced off from animals. Thirdly there were some shallow wells that had been dug in the community with tin covers over them. The local NGO staff asked how this had come about. The community members told them "We really enjoyed building the football field together and after that we decided to create a development committee and choose one activity after another to work on as a group. After the football field we decided to look at the water issue and invited another NGO well known for water programs to come and do some training and help us purchase filters". As a result of the training on water hygiene and sanitation, they learnt they needed to fence their water source off from animals and also about shallow wells and how to keep them from becoming contaminated.

LESSONS LEARNT FROM THIS CASE STUDY

In this case study, the local NGO made an important decision to respect the goals and vision of the local community even when they didn't agree. As a result the community learnt the valuable process of organising collective action and community-led development. Empowering the community to set and achieve their own goals created ownership over their initiatives, built confidence and self worth, and led to sustained collective action and on-going development. Had the local NGO disempowered the community by dictating to the community what their needs and goals should have been, the outcome may have been very different. The effect could have been detrimental to the long-term development of the community and potentially compounded the community member's experience of poverty.

CONCLUSION

Empowered communities who are able to work collectively in solidarity will be able to effect long-term change in their communities. Therefore rather than trying to fix the community for them, seek to empower and support the community as they engage in holistic and transformational change. This will require development actors to critically reflect on their notions of poverty and development and strip away ethnocentric values in order to embrace the process of community-led development rather than focusing on predetermined outputs.