



An Introduction to Poverty

Written by Colin Scott, Director of Churches of Christ Overseas Aid (COCOA), the Relief and Development programme of Global Mission Partners (GMP). First published in GMP's *In Partnership* Newsletter.



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Definitions and Measurement

This month we begin a new series looking at poverty. The aim is to understand more deeply what life is like for people who are poor. We begin with looking at ways of defining or measuring poverty and will move on to look at causes of poverty and the variety of ways that we can respond.

Children sit down for their lunch provided by the school, at Emmanuel School, South Sudan. Image featured on the 2016/17 GMP Great Gifts Catalogue

Biblical Mandate

Looking through the Bible we see God is passionately concerned about people who are poor (Lk 4:18-19; James 2:5), and expects us to share that passion (Mt 25:31-46). In fact, helping the poor is equated with worshipping, honoring and serving God (Acts 10:4; Pr 14:31). As well as an important form of worship, serving the poor is a way of leading people to salvation – both the poor and those who watch the actions of Christians (Mt 5:16; 1Pe 2:12), and a spiritual discipline that keeps us in touch with God (Phil 2:1-11).

Four Methods

We can identify four key ways of measuring poverty. There is no need to decide which way is best. They each add something to our understanding and each may be useful in some situations and not in others.

Monetary

The biblical words expressing poverty certainly understand poverty as a lack of physical resources (Lk 6:20; 7:22; 14:31, 21; 16:20, 22; 18:22; 21:3). Money is the key way that people acquire resources so poverty is often expressed as the monetary income of a person per day. \$1.25 per day is currently

thought of as the criteria for extreme poverty. The Millennium Development Goals saw the proportion of people living on \$1.25 per day move from 47% in 1990 to 22% in 2010. Often this figure is labeled PPP (Purchasing Power Parity). This is a measure, which takes account of things like differing prices across the world and the fact that many people grow their own food rather than buying it. The advantage of monetary measures are that they are relatively easy to measure, widely understood and accepted, and easy to communicate. Its shortcoming is that it only measures one thing and we know that money doesn't get us everything that we need (Lk 12:13-21).

Capabilities

A number of people, most notably Amartya Sen (1999, *Development As Freedom*, Oxford University Press, Oxford.), have taken the approach that it is not so much our income but what we can do with it and other resources that matters. Can we exercise the freedoms and capabilities that we desire? Someone earning \$2 per day but without access to education would still be considered poor. At the same time we are aware that some people with very few resources live joyful and fulfilling lives. Teams visiting our

partners overseas often reflect on this fact. The Human Development Index (<http://hdr.undp.org/en/content/human-development-index-hdi-table>) gives a measure of poverty based on this approach. It rates each country on the basis of: 1) the percentage of people likely to die before they are 60; 2) the percentage of adults who are functionally illiterate; 3) the percentage of the population without sustainable access to an improved water source; and 4) the percentage of children under weight for age. These are put together to create an index. When we put countries together in order of the index we find that Australia is second only to Norway in the Very High Human Development category. Of our partner countries, Fiji and Thailand just get in to the High Human Development category. Indonesia, Vietnam, Vanuatu, India, and Bangladesh rate medium and Papua New Guinea and Zimbabwe are in the Low Human Development category. Niger and the Democratic Republic of the Congo are last and second last, and there is not enough information for South Sudan to get a rating.

To be continued

We will look at the other two approaches in the next two issues – inequality and voices of the poor.



Definitions and Measurement part 2

Last month we started a new series aiming to understand more deeply what life is like for people who are poor. We began by looking at two ways of measuring poverty- Monetary Income, often expressed in terms of Purchasing Power Parity, which makes adjustment for varying purchasing power around the world and for the non-cash economy. And then the Capabilities Approach, which focuses on our ability to do the things that are important to us, often measured by the Human Development Index. This month we look at two other methods:

Inequality

This approach focuses on the economic disparity between people. It reflects the reality that people feel poorer when they know have less than their neighbours. As the world becomes increasingly connected by telecommunications, our global neighbours become increasingly aware of the difference between their lifestyle and ours. But it is not just the jealousy factor that makes a difference. Research shows that countries that have greater inequality fare worse on every social indicator, for example incarceration, teenage pregnancy, mental and general health rates. In fact, inequality is a better predictor of these things than income. That is, a lower income with more equality is better than a higher income with less equality. This is the principle set out in 2 Corinthians 8:13-15. Wilkinson and Pickett demonstrate this statistically in *The Spirit Level: Why More Equal Societies Almost Always Do Better*.

Participatory

As people struggled with the idea of defining and measuring poverty, someone finally said, "Why don't we ask the poor what they think?!" A 1999 survey by the World Bank called *Voices of the Poor* is the biggest attempt to do this

"The poor describe ill being as lack of material things - food especially but also lack of work, money, shelter and clothing -- and living and working in often unhealthy, polluted and risky environments. They also defined ill being as bad experiences and bad feelings about the self. Perceptions of powerlessness over one's life and of voicelessness was common; so was anxiety and fear for the future".

"Poverty is lack of freedom, enslaved by crushing daily burden, by depression and fear of what the future will bring." — Georgia

"If you want to do something and have no power to do it, it is talauchi (poverty)." — Nigeria

"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." — a blind woman from Tiraspol, Moldova

Similar reflections are found in Proverbs 13:8; 14:20; 19:4,7 and 22:7.

Colin Scott,
COCOA Director.



Causes of Poverty

In South Sudan

The bright young woman in the photo is enjoying life in Marialbai as she attends Emmanuel Orphan Primary School. The community leaders have organised a family for her to stay with, as her immediate family have been lost to the long civil war in South Sudan. GMP helps out by providing schooling and a midday meal. It is a positive and hopeful story, but when we ask why she is in this situation, things get more complicated.

One obvious reason is the war that killed her family. We could then ask why there was a war – political ambition, scarce resources, cultural and tribal differences would be some of the answers. The poverty of the country she lives in is another reason. This is why the government currently can't supply the school and lunch. Part of the reason the government doesn't have the resources is because its income is not steady. South Sudan has significant oil reserves, but these have to be shipped through Sudan, which they have only just finished a war with, so oil has fluctuated from 98 to 0% of South Sudan's economy, depending on whether the South Sudanese are willing to work with the transportation terms that Sudan is offering. And you can imagine the political wrestling that goes on for control of oil resources...

Of course, like most developing countries, South Sudan has significant debts. These were taken out to help get it through the hard times and to kickstart the economy. Now they are largely a burden on the country, doing the exact opposite.

Meanwhile, our young woman has survived in the country with the highest infant mortality and female illiteracy rates in the world (2011). Lack of female literacy is part of the reason for high infant mortality. And of course lack of funding for education is part of the reason for poor literacy rates.

In Summary

This bright young woman's story illustrates that the causes of poverty are both broad and deep. She faces a breadth of causes like being orphaned, poor education facilities and poor health facilities. Each of these causes has deeper causes including the war and the poverty of the government, which in turn have deeper causes like tribal conflict, poor infrastructure and scarce resources.

It is simplistic to say there is only one cause of poverty, even in the immediate situation. This type of thinking can lead us to imagining that one solution will cure poverty. Our school in Marialbai will help, but it is not a complete solution.

It is also important to recognise the causes behind the causes. This helps us to see the limits of any one intervention and challenges us to work at a variety of levels. In our story for example, our young woman has some individual choices to make about engaging in education. Even if she makes the best choices these will be limited by the opportunities available to her. She needs the community to play its part with a quality school, a home to stay in and adequate food. To fulfill this responsibility the community will need the back up of a good and well-resourced government, which in turn will rely on an international community that facilitates fair trade and generous aid.

God expects us all to play our part. The Bible speaks about both the personal causes of poverty (Pr 6:6-8, 20:13, 21:17, 23:21), and systemic ones like oppression (Le 19:15; Ex 22:25-27; Je 22:13; Jas 5:1-6) and inequality (Am 5:11-12; Ez 22:29; Micah 2:2; Is 5:8), and of the obligation of those who would worship God to get involved (Pr 14:31, 17:5, 19:17).

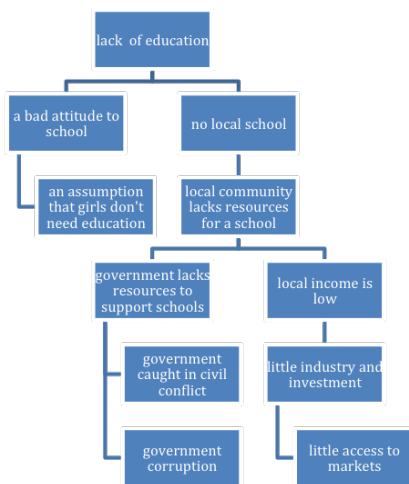
Colin Scott
COCOA Director



Young girl from Emmanuel Children's Program South Sudan.

Causes of Poverty part 2

Last month we saw that any one example of a person in poverty probably has more than one cause, and each cause probably has a chain of causes behind it. So, if a girl in South Sudan misses out on an education most of the things in the diagram below will be in play.



This “tree” shows us that the causes of poverty are wide reaching and deep. As the roots keep going down, they eventually get to us – people who live far away and wish only the best for our neighbours in developing countries. The policies that we encourage in our government and in the businesses we support affect the opportunities our neighbours have. That’s why GMP promotes advocacy and lifestyle change as part of the way we respond to global poverty.

If we go down to the tip of the deepest roots (and indeed to a lot of places on the way) we find selfish choices. The Bible calls these ‘sin’ (Mt 5:21ff). If sin is the root cause of poverty, it means that we are all poor in some ways, even if we are not resource poor. Christians have tried to explain these connections with various models, the most well-known of which comes from Bryant L. Myers in his book *Walking With the Poor: Principles and Practices of Transformational Development*, 1999, Orbis Books. Myers explains that sin breaks down four key relationships.



Instead of worshipping and serving GOD we worship and serve created things, distorting our values system. Instead of relating to OTHERS with grace, love and forgiveness our relationships are marred by greed, deceit and abuse. Instead

of SOCIAL SYSTEMS marked by grace and justice, they are marred by exploitation and indifference. Instead of sharing CREATION equitably and caring for it, we overuse the earth and hoard its blessings for ourselves.

God is working to restore humanity in all of these aspects and calls us to be part of this wholistic ministry of reconciliation. At COCOA this means moving our action further down the roots of the poverty tree whenever we can. Our support for schooling in South Sudan, for example, has involved the local community in providing the resources they have – they provide accommodation for the children. It has also involved helping the local community to form its own legally recognised community organisation and to petition the government and other NGOs for their involvement in providing teachers and providing the daily meal for the students. We are also working on ways of including the children in shaping the program and including kids with a disability and encouraging girls to stay at school.

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COCOA Director



Marginalisation and Social Exclusion

In August, we looked at Inequality and the Voices of the Poor as ways to understand poverty. Inequality highlighted that it is not just the absolute lack of money that makes people poor, but also how their income compares to the people around them. We see this in developed countries like Australia, where a homeless person may have a lot more money than people overseas, but is still considered to be poor. We also see it in the developing world. While the average income has increased in many countries, it has not been equally shared, and the poor are often left further behind.

The participatory method of listening to what the poor say about poverty also highlighted the social aspect of being poor. “When one is poor, she has no say in public, she feels inferior,” said a woman from Uganda, in the Voices of the Poor Survey (World Bank 1999). Her lack of money obviously affects the ways she feels about fitting in to society and doubtless, the way society relates to her as well.

Jesus was very conscious of this social aspect of poverty. He made sure that he included: women (Lk 8:1-3), people with disabilities (Mt 8:1-3), people of different ethnic backgrounds (Mt 15:21-28), children (Mk 10:14-16), as well as the poor. A good community development project will consider the impact it has

on gender equality, people with a disability, indigenous people, ethnic minorities and children – the similarity with Jesus’ list still escapes some development people! The point of both lists is that including everyone is vital to positive change.

As our COCOA project suite builds, we have worked on making social inclusion an integral part of it. Across all of our projects we check that groups who are easily excluded have an opportunity to participate. In terms of gender equality and disability, this means quantifying the participation of women and men, and people with a disability, and looking for ways to open up involvement to those who have the least chance to participate. As a small, somewhat marginal movement, we sometimes find ourselves naturally amongst ethnic minorities. This is particularly the case in Bangladesh, where the Bandarban Hills Churches of Christ are made up of minority groups who are often not treated well by the majority people who control the government. In regards to children, we train and support our partners to develop a child protection policy, which keeps children safe. We are also working with partners to develop ways that children can have more say in the programs of which they are part. In Bangladesh, for example, the girl and boy captains are included in the Hostel Management Committee.

We also have projects specifically aimed at groups who are often on the edge of society. For example, Bright Solutions works with marginalised women and our work with Binh Phuoc Association for the Disabled, the Poor and Orphans is with people with a disability. We also have several projects focused on children such as Khayelihle Children’s Village in Zimbabwe, Emmanuel Children’s Centre in South Sudan and the Gnyan Sampada Residential School In India.

We have the power to change marginalisation and social exclusion because they begin with the attitudes that we hold about people who are different from us. We can begin the change by the way we treat and talk about people of the female gender, people with a disability, indigenous people, ethnic minorities and children. In fact, Jesus encourages us to go one step further and take notice of these people because they are often great examples of faith. He points out a female prostitute who shows greater devotion that a church official (Lk 7:43-45), a Canaanite woman who recognises how precious the Kingdom is (Mt 15:21-28), and a child that shows the only way to enter the Kingdom (Mk 10:14-16).



COCOA responds to poverty in a variety of ways, including training midwives in South Sudan. This equips people to serve their neighbours.

Responses

So far we have seen that poverty generally has a variety of causes, and affects people broadly – not just physically but emotionally, spiritually and socially. This month looks at how we might respond to people in poverty.

Here is a list of possible responses:

1. Give people the resources they lack;
2. Provide the services that people need;
3. Build infrastructure that is lacking;
4. Provide new technology, or
5. Give people things we have.

All of these responses have their upsides and downsides. Giving people resources and services can make a change quickly, but can lack a long-term solution by making people dependent on outsiders. Infrastructure can provide a good kick start so long as someone does the maintenance! Technology can

solve particular problems but needs training to accompany it. Giving people what we have and value may treat people as equals, but has the downside of teaching them the consumerism that we are trying to avoid.

While the technical quality of our response is important, most important is the relationship that we have with the poor. We have previously highlighted the social impact of poverty – people feeling less than human because of their lack of resources. Those of us with more resources and technology can sometimes look at the poor and feel superior. We can be guilty of giving ourselves credit for the blessings that we have!

Treating people with dignity and respect is critical. Deuteronomy 24:10-13 is a great illustration. If you give a loan to someone who is poor, you must not go into his or her house to choose the item to be offered as security. Just because someone is poor, that is no license to invade his or her privacy.

So rather than think of people who are poor as inferior, we must see them as equals – equally made, loved and valued by God. This attitude stops us from thinking of poverty as a problem for the poor, or a problem caused by the poor.

Lilla Watson, a Gangulu woman from Dawson River (Queensland) is credited with this quote:

“If you have come to help me you can go home. But if you see my struggle as part of your own survival, then perhaps we can work together.”

Poverty is everyone’s problem, and we all need to work on eradicating it.

So our primary response to poverty is not what we do, but our solidarity with the poor. The King in Matthew 25:40 stands in solidarity with the least. The way we treat them is the way we treat him.

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Rights

December In Partnership affirmed that our attitude to people who are poor is the most important part of our response (Pr. 14:31). We must stand in solidarity with them like our King does. This month we ask what sort of practical response might flow most naturally from this standpoint.

We are familiar with biblical teaching on the intrinsic value and equality of people (Gn. 1:27). Much of the Old and New Testament works out what this means in practice, summarised in the golden rule (Mt. 7:12). Treating others like ourselves means giving them the same rights we want for ourselves. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights lists 30 key rights. To stand in solidarity with the poor is to recognise that they have the same rights as us (a statement of equality), and to work towards them enjoying more of those rights in practice. There are three main ways that we might do this, each corresponding to a different reason that people are not enjoying their rights fully.

Education

Firstly, if people are unaware of their rights then informing and educating them can help. In Thailand, for example, part of UNOH's project has been to teach people that they have a right to public healthcare and to help them learn how to access the public health system.

Advocacy

Secondly, if a person's rights are being denied by someone or something then challenging the oppressor and helping the victims to challenge them can help. In Uzbekistan, for example, when children were being taken out of school to work on government cotton farms, GMP joined the Stop the Traffik Campaign to challenge this behaviour. People wrote letters to the clothing companies who used the cotton, asking them to stop and saying that they would not buy their clothes until they stopped. The campaign changed the way that a big company like Rivers operated.

Capacity Building

Thirdly, if a person or entity (most often the government) is not fulfilling its responsibility, assisting them to do this can help. In South Sudan, for example, the government has been unable to provide maternal health facilities to curb the huge rates of infant and maternal mortality, so our maternal health project has helped by training the first group of midwives to bring 15 new people with the needed skills into the state health system. Responding to gaps in civil society capacity, like the maternal health system in South Sudan, is at the heart of many of COCOA's projects. Currently we

are working in the education and health systems in South Sudan, the children's social welfare system in Zimbabwe, and the disability support system in Vietnam. In each of these cases we want to assist with filling the gap, doing so in a way that keeps the responsibility clearly with the government. In South Sudan, for example, we have funded the primary school education of 240 children (which grew to 410!) plus a lunchtime meal for each of them for the last five years. If we keep doing this indefinitely we take this responsibility away from the local authorities, so last year we started negotiations with the Department of Education. Our program manager Paulino Malou has followed through and the department has agreed to take over the funding of the teachers' wages from 2018. Paulino also talked with the World Food Program and we are on track for them to take over the feeding program some time in 2016. These small steps mean that the rights of vulnerable children are fulfilled more and more by the government that is responsible for them.

"Speak up and judge fairly; defend the rights of the poor and needy."
Proverbs 31:9

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