

Poverty and identifying the Poor

Dr. Usha S. Nayar

For this presentation, I have tried to conceptualise the basic ideas about poverty and to classify these ideas into some categories. This presentation will also look at the criteria for identifying the poor when we wish to work with poverty groups.

At the threshold of the next millennium, cities throughout the world face formidable challenges to deal with a spate of urban pathologies, problems of survival, crime, delinquencies, violence, unemployment and environmental degradation. (Sengupta, 2000). Poverty, whether rural or urban, therefore needs to be looked at from a range of perspectives. Poor women, men and children experience poverty in their daily lives. It affects where they live, what they eat, how they spend their days, and above all, their general well being. It is a multi-faceted issue. Within the general condition of poverty itself, for instance, individuals experience poverty differently according to their gender, age, caste, class and ethnicity. Income levels and food security are invariably influenced by these factors. (Susan Loughhead, Onkar Mittal, 2000)

Poverty is not of just one type, one homogenous group of persons. It is also linked with various types and various degrees of deprivations.

Types of Poverty	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Inherited Poverty ◆ Instant Poverty ◆ Temporary Poverty ◆ New Poverty ◆ Relative Poverty 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Hidden Poverty ◆ Endemic Poverty ◆ Overcrowding Poverty ◆ Terminal Poverty ◆ Absolute Poverty

While analysing different kinds of Poverty, **Inherited Poverty**, would refer to a situation, when poor parents have poor children, who grow up to be poor parents and this cycle goes on and for generations people remain poor.

Then there is **Instant Poverty**, which is caused by some crisis or disaster, and it could be for a very short time. For example, it could be because of lack of rains or because of too much rain, and for some persons it can be a temporary event. Once the main crisis passes, gradually the family can rise above the deep poverty level.

Temporary Poverty, there could be also another type of poverty which is also temporary, like the poverty due to War. The situation of the poor persons during the war can change over short periods of time.

The **New Poverty** is related to people living close to the edge. They are not really poor but can become due to changes in the circumstances like the persons who retire from work or when sudden

inflation and crashing of financial markets eat away the value of salaries of persons. These persons become poor in a new way, they were all right before those precipitating events and now with some outside changes they have become poor.

Another concept is that of **Relative Poverty**. This is a very fashionable concept particularly when well-off persons from middle class and upper middle class, they want to laugh at our work with the poor population groups. They say that they are also poor because they cannot afford to have every thing that they would like to have. For example, the persons who are relatively poor would have shelter, they have food, and their basics needs are fulfilled, but they cannot afford to have for their children expensive private education. So this relativity concept has to be understood and addressed to better-off persons, who would like to benefit from your work.

The concept of **Hidden Poverty** is related to persons living in far-away, very remote conditions. No one knows about them. They are deprived but the organisations and persons working with poor groups do not know about them.

There can be **Endemic Poverty**, in terms of spread of poverty over a geographical area. Low productivity and poor base of resources in the area may cause it. For example, in the same country, there can be variations in the situation of poor population groups in different areas. In cities, there can be groups of displaced workers coming from rural areas, who can be very poor. This concept is very similar to **Overcrowding Poverty**, when a large numbers of persons are forced to live in small and overcrowded areas. In such situations, persons may have no choice but to force themselves to share shelters, share food, share everything.

Terminal Poverty relates to those population groups who have been poor from the beginning of their life and they will be poor till the end of their life too, so that there is no change in their condition during their lifetime. Usually, you see some changes in the lives of persons, some times for better and some times for worse, but for terminal poverty, the condition always remains bad. Finally, let me talk about the concept of **Absolute Poverty**.

Absolute Poverty as defined by Robert McNamara in the Oxfam Poverty Report

A condition of life so limited by malnutrition, illiteracy, disease, squalid surroundings, high infant mortality, and low life expectancy as to be beneath any reasonable definition of human decency.

For the sociological point of view, where the population is more, you are likely to see more absolute poverty. United Nations has also explained this. It is a condition of life, which is limited by malnutrition, illiteracy, disease, high infant mortality, and low life expectancy. With all these parameters and indicators, they are always the worse off as they are living under conditions unfit for human decency.

Economic Dimension of Poverty

Gross National Product (GNP) as a measure of poverty – This means using Average National Income measured in US Dollars as a Criteria for Defining Poverty. With this definition countries are divided into Developed Countries, Developing Countries and Least Developed Countries
It does NOT keep into account the Local Cost of Living

The economic dimension of poverty can be measured through **Gross National Product (GNP)** by looking at national average income, which is measured in US dollars to facilitate comparison between countries. On the basis of GNP, the whole world is divided into developed countries, developing countries and least developed countries. But there can be other ways of looking at our countries and our resources. For example, once I was at an international consultation meeting about adolescent health groups and a social scientist from UK while speaking to our group, said that “Usha is from a strong and developed country, India”. He said this because we were discussing the cultural context of adolescent health. But economically I come from a developing country. So how interesting is that all other dimensions like the cultural dimension get neglected while the economic viewpoint of looking at issues predominates? How can you look at the income of a population measured only in US dollars and call them poor, without keeping into account the local cost of living?

Quality of Life Index

This is another instrument for measuring poverty, developed by United Nations Development Program (UNDP). It considers a variety of factors like life expectancy, number of hospitals, doctors, nurses, schools, pollution levels, etc. for defining poverty. So it is a better instrument to consider poverty at country levels.

Quality of Life Index is another way to look at definition of poverty at international level. This Index has been defined by UNDP and it considers a variety of factors like life expectancy, number of hospitals in a particular area or district, number of qualified doctors, nurses, schools, the level of pollution in a particular area, etc. By looking at all these different factors a comprehensive picture of the quality of life of persons is calculated, to define the level of development of different countries and the level of poverty between them.

In every society, the poor lives are shorter and less healthy than those, who are better off. The insecurity and vulnerability behind this grim reality has many causes. War and civil conflict destroy the livelihoods of unprecedented numbers of people, creating vast flows of refugees. Employment is increasingly insecure in many countries and wages have fallen. State provision of health care, education, clean water and sanitation is restricted, exposing poor people to health risks, reducing their productivity and opportunities. Geographical isolation cuts people off from social welfare provision, markets and sources of information. More people are living in ecologically fragile areas, where they are exposed to risks of flooding and soil erosion. Structures of social ‘inferiority’ related

to caste, race and ethnicity coupled with lack of control over resources, increase the vulnerability of the poor. Underlying all these disadvantages is the denial of rights suffered by women who experience systematic social and economic discrimination from the cradle to the grave. (Watkins, 1995)

North-South Dimension of Poverty and Chains of Exploitation

- ◆ North is rich and represents the developed world and South is poor, representing the developing and least developed countries.
- ◆ The rich North needs collaboration of partners in poor countries for exploitation
- ◆ There can be local North and South inside each country, among each population

Now let me talk about North-South dimension of poverty. It means that persons based in any country in the north of the world represent the rich while persons living in the south of the world are in poor countries. Now this is another way of looking at developed, developing and least developing countries. Here we have to remember what Mahatma Gandhi had said: “There is enough in the world to look after the needs of everyone but there is not enough to look after the greed of anyone.” So if we take north and south of the world together, there is enough for everyone and we need not discuss about the poverty today. The North and South dimension is there, not just between the countries, but also inside each country there are north and south, each with different level of prosperity and poverty.

There can be no greater indictment of our world than the fact that one in four of its inhabitants is consigned to poverty. This represents a **denial of rights** and wastage of human potential on a massive scale. If the present pattern of development is allowed to continue unchallenged, the future is a frightening prospect, of a world with deep divisions, of societies segregated between the ‘haves’ and the ‘have-nots’, between those with skills and opportunities, jobs and wealth, and those with nothing, between those who ‘count’ in economic, social and political terms and those who do not. This is a prescription for deepening instability. The global poverty profile is slowly changing and taking on a more urban face. In many countries, rapid population growth, agricultural modernisation and inequalities in land ownership are resulting in an increase in landlessness among the rural poor and an accelerating their drift to urban centres.

As urban populations increase so does the extent of urban poverty. If poverty was an infectious disease, which could be caught by the rich as well as the poor, it would have been eradicated long ago. Apart from being socially unjust, high levels of inequality and widespread poverty are a source of economic inefficiency since they waste human potential.

Wider distribution of productive assets, secure and equitable forms of employment, and an end to discriminatory measures which benefit a small, wealthy elite but consign large numbers of people to

poverty, excluding them from a share in the prosperity they have helped to create are all important elements of strategies to end poverty. Economic growth is imperative if poverty is to be reduced, but the distribution of wealth is as important as its creation. At an international level there is gross mal-distribution of resources, where world trade and finance bodies support an increasing concentration of wealth in the industrialised world. Developments within countries have mirrored the trends in the international economy with the poorest sections of society becoming increasingly marginalised. In most developing countries, on an average the poorest fifth of the population share between them little more than 5 percent of national income, while the wealthiest fifth claim over 50%. (Watkins, 1995).

Linked to the North-South dimension of poverty are the **chains of exploitation** at various levels. It can be at a very macro level like the North exploiting South. It can be also within the country when the more powerful and rich persons exploit the poor, when persons of higher caste exploit the lower caste groups, when the more skilled persons exploit the non-skilled persons, when the educated persons exploit the less educated or non-educated persons. There is also a gender dimension of the chains of exploitation when men exploit the women. Sometimes, women can also exploit men, but it is not done in a systematic way like it happens to women exploited by men.

Elements of the **poverty trap** include unequal rights to land and other productive resources, inadequate provision of health care and education, and the inability of the poorest to influence decisions affecting their lives. Corrupt and unaccountable governments' misplaced public spending priorities and development policies, which marginalise poor people in the name of economic progress are all a part of the picture. Once again, the various elements interact with one another. External debt repayments and low commodity prices deprive countries and communities of the resources they need to invest in production and social welfare provision, increasing their exposure to economic crisis and poverty. This lethal interaction of global forces with local structures of poverty is the basis of the poverty trap. There is a need for redistribution of land in favour of poor men and women (in areas marked by extreme inequality in access to land) and prevention of extreme concentration of land ownership. (Watkins, 1995).

Now, I shall like to briefly mention the attributes of the poverty, which means talking about what happens when a person or a group is in poverty. I am sure that you know about the attributes of poverty from your own personal experience. One very important thing happens when one is poor. It means to be **powerless**. As a poor person, you really feel helpless and what psychologists call prolonged helplessness. The helplessness becomes part of the persons. "So, what can I do? Who will listen to me? I am poor, what is my voice?" These feelings come in. The feeling of inability to influence anything, which affects one's life. It does not mean that all poor people are not aware of the opportunities in their country. Some of them are aware of the opportunities, but they feel that they are caught in a vicious cycle and they do not have the power to get out of it.

If a person is sick or a person is disabled, it is more likely that the person is poor. When a person is poor, his accessibility to assistance and services is more difficult. The persons may know that there are services but they are not accessible to them. The illness of a family member imposes huge costs on the rest of the household, either in terms of loss of income, especially if the main income earner

is sick, but also from the high cost of treatment. These problems are exacerbated in countries where the medical profession oversubscribes medicines, involving patients in expensive drug therapy, along with consultation fees. In this context, as in others, poor people suffer from a lack of informed choices. (Loughhead, Mittal, 2000).

When, I was a psychology student and doing my masters degree, I saw an interesting experiment. In which, beautiful toys were kept locked in a cupboard and children were kept outside, from where they could see those toys but they did not have access to touch those toys or play with them. This experiment was used to measure the frustration of this experience. It was a very inhuman experiment, but it was explained to us that this is how we create frustration and measure it in an experimental situation. Similarly, if you are a person with disability, you may find that some services are not there, but some services exist, which are not accessible especially if the person lives in a slum in the city or in poor rural areas. Schools may be there but not all children have access to education especially in some countries. If you are a girl child your chances of getting into schools are less. You cannot choose to be a girl or a boy, but if you are born a girl, your status is less than that of a boy. If for going to school you have to pay for your shoes and uniforms then, your chances of going to school becomes less. Sometimes children are needed in poor families to look after the younger siblings. They cannot have toys for playing, they must take care of their younger brothers or sisters. Sometimes older children need to look after their families and must work for their own survival, therefore they cannot go to schools. Thus, lack of education can be another criteria through which, one can look at the poverty.

At least 55 million working children in the world, due to their work, local conditions, poverty and various other constrains, are deprived of education, health care, play and recreation which are *sine qua non* for their physical and psychosocial development. In general, children work for their own account as paid or piece-rate wage earners, or assist an adult worker who may be a family member. There is enough evidence that many children start working at a very early age and do hazardous work for 12-15 hours a day without any holiday. (Naidu and Kapadia, 1984).

Women are subject to multiple forms of deprivation from the cradle to the grave. Throughout the world, women play a key role in household livelihood systems in productive and reproductive capacity. As producers, they provide most of the food consumed by poor households, performing more than three-quarters of agricultural labour in many countries. In addition, they manage common resources and are responsible for collecting water and firewood. Female labour also accounts for a growing proportion of employment in commercial, agriculture and industry. Despite this contribution, women face a bewildering array of social, economic, cultural and religious barriers to their equal participation in society. The consequences of these barriers in terms of lost opportunities and increased vulnerability and suffering are immeasurable.

Some indication of their destructive effect can be summarised in a few revealing statistics. For example: Out of the 130 million children not attending primary school, some 70 per cent are female. In India, boys are twice as likely to attend secondary school as girls. Out of the 960 million illiterate adults in the world, two thirds are women. In many countries, especially in Asia, malnutrition rates are higher among girls than boys. Most female labour goes undocumented and unpaid, even though

it is vital to family survival and national economies, and in most cultures women have less opportunity than men to develop their capabilities. Although women produce most food, and female headed households account for the majority of rural households in many countries women lack ownership or effective control over land, water and other resources.

Children in poor households in poor countries assume responsibilities for fetching water, minding animals and collecting fuel wood, in addition to caring for their parents when they reach adulthood. (Watkins, 1995). The child labourers are subject to severe exploitation and occupational hazards. The working children miss out schooling, which affects their human development. The girl child labourers are in addition subject to risk of sexual abuse. (Naidu and Kapadia, 1984).

What kind of work do the poor get? Poor are likely to be in informal sector, working for daily wages, without any kind of protection or social security. They often work long hours for very low wages.

Poverty among the **minority groups** is another important aspect. Poor persons belonging to ethnic or religious or linguistic minorities are also vulnerable to poverty and not only to the economic poverty. A variety of historical, social, political and economic processes impose vulnerability on the powerless disadvantaged communities. And, at the core of their disadvantage and powerlessness is the absence or denial of certain basic rights. (Nayar, 1991).

The high concentration of power and privileges deriving from the combined effects of inequalities based on class, caste, and gender has made for an environment that is extremely hostile to social change and broad-based political participation. Attempts by women to claim their property rights, or by agricultural labourers to claim higher wages, or by members of the scheduled castes to resist high caste oppression have often been met with violence, rape and murder. (Dreze and Sen, 1998).

In the context of urban poverty it is the incidence of increasing participation of women in the urban informal sector that highlight the reinforcing interaction between feminisation of work and **feminisation of poverty** in urban areas. This also results in regular domestic violence due to the fact that the stepping of the women outside the home in search of employment to sustain the family leaves the husband behind at home with a sense of guilt, powerlessness which culminates into accusing their wives of infidelity and hence a cause for added domestic harassment.

Another visible trend of added poverty amongst the urban poor is poverty compounded with **disability**. In a situation where the family has a meagre income combined with problems of alcoholism, gambling, large family structure etc., the women have to bear the brunt of it all. Her odds to face life increases manifold leaving very little scope for workable solutions to meet the regular needs of the family and the challenges of disability.

An integrated view of urban poverty is linked to the concept of **vulnerability**. The concept of poverty that is generally based on fixed measures, is a static concept whereas vulnerability is a dynamic issue as it covers the multifaceted aspects of socio-economic changes. People move in and out of poverty but may be trapped into new kinds of vulnerability. Although poor people are usually

among the most vulnerable, not all vulnerable people are poor. Moreover, vulnerability exists at individual, household and community level. The primary indicator of vulnerability is poverty, which results from individual's low income, insecure employment and underemployment, low wage occupation, poor health, lack of competitive skills, productive assets, education, etc. Lack of access to shelter and basic services is another indicator of relative deprivation and vulnerability. Degraded living environment in slums, squatter settlements and on pavements and the insecure tenure status of the squatters create the conditions or basis of such vulnerability. Faced with the struggle for existence, poorly housed communities suffer from violence both from within and outside the community. Gender, caste, ethnic and communal factors accentuate poverty and vulnerability of the communities. Women, children, the aged and disabled, all experience multiple forms of vulnerability. Both economic and non-economic factors are at play in creating vulnerability of different dimensions.

In most cities certain occupations through which many women draw their sources of livelihood render those women most vulnerable. Sex workers are one of such vulnerable groups. The vulnerability of sex workers essentially stems from their poverty conditions. They continue to live in poverty because they are kept bound down by a set of exploitative work conditions; because they are neither free as workers, which means the process of sale of their labour is governed by factors beyond their control, nor do they have the social option of not working as a sex worker. Vulnerability refers to a condition of living that is detrimental to the psychological, physical and social well being of individuals, communities and social groups. Poverty and vulnerability in terms of loss of social, human and physical assets, social exclusion and inequality are seen to be on the increase. (Sengupta, 2000).

Another manifestation of poverty is the alarming growth in the number of **street children** into the metropolitan cities. They live and grow up on the margins of society, in a state of neglect and deprivation, often without education, without affection, care and guidance from adults. The street children live, work and struggle for survival in an environment, which is not sympathetic to them. (D'Lima Hazel etc., 1992). Acute poverty coupled with domestic violence in rural and urban households often compel the children even as young as 4- 5 years to seek refuge away from their homes by running away. Their tryst with poverty does not end here. They get entrapped into another web of poverty, which results into a life on the streets, which is compounded by sexual, physical and emotional exploitation. Left with no alternatives they are resigned to work as rag pickers, casual labourers in restaurants or resort to begging. The vulnerability of these children often makes them an easy prey for exploitation in the commercial sex markets, which is ever growing by leaps and bounds.

Another attribute of poverty is linked to **wars and armaments**, eating up disproportionate parts of the national budgets. They kill and disable whole populations and they create millions of homeless people. Naturally this worsens the poverty. Significant reductions in expenditure on the military could translate into increased public investment in socially useful and productive activities. Military spending represents a massive diversion of resources from investment in human capacity, throughout the developing world. (Watkins, 1995).

Finally, it is interesting to look at the spiritual dimension of poverty. Often the poor persons believe in faith and God and they may not give much importance to the socioeconomic and political context of poverty. That is how many times politicians can make them much more poorer by creating conflicts and promoting violence among them. At the same time they can draw tremendous amount of energy through their beliefs in spirituality to cope with the poverty.

Why should we identify the poor?

- ◆ To target limited resources properly
- ◆ Not everyone in a “poor” community is poor
- ◆ Inside a family, women or children may be “poorer”

Why do we need to **identify the poor**? When we work with communities, we find out that all persons in that community may not be poor. We know that even when we work with slum communities, some of the persons living in slums are not as poor as some others. They may even be well off but they live in slums for various other reasons. Also within a family, some persons may be more vulnerable and so if you work with the whole family, you have to make sure that those more vulnerable members benefit from it. We know that, within a family, the poorer and more vulnerable are likely to be women, children, disabled persons and elderly persons. So it is important to have some indicators or clear criteria for identifying the poor. These can become parameters for our work and help us to reflect on why we are working with one poor group and not with another group.

Some Examples of Criteria for Identifying the Poor

- ◆ Grameen bank (Bangladesh)- Poor are those who do not have more than 0.5 acre of land and whose annual income is less than annual income from 1 acre of cultivable land according to local rates
- ◆ Ikhtiar (Malaysia) – has a test considering all landholdings, assets and income of persons for identifying the poor.
- ◆ BRAC (Bangladesh) mainly targets landless peasants.
- ◆ WATCH (Nepal) – works mainly for landless peasants and “low-caste” women.
- ◆ Maryada (India) – does participatory appraisal for identifying the poor.
- ◆ SCF (Sri Lanka) – works mainly for women headed households, single mothers, landless with 3 or more children

What do we mean by poor or poverty groups with whom we are working in community development projects or community-based rehabilitation projects? These **criteria** should be verifiable, they should be not subjective. While developing a project, these criteria should be discussed with the target groups and the target groups should participate in deciding the criteria. If they are the ones who will decide it then the project activities become more effective because they become owners of the decisions of including some people and excluding others. Poverty is a dynamic concept. Those who are poor today should not remain always poor, their situation should change and it should change for the better. Given that the condition of poverty is dynamic, support for the poor who are presently socially active, may not protect them from a reversal of fortunes tomorrow. A sustainable approach to poverty reduction therefore requires a combination of social development and social protection measures to ensure that the improving poor continue to improve; the coping poor graduate out of their precarious state, and the declining poor have an opportunity to reverse their condition. (Susan Loughhead, Onkar Mittal, 2000). So we need to have regular evaluation of our work to see how the situation is changing, how the other groups can come and get benefit, and those who have benefited they can go on their own and help others. For doing these kind of evaluations workers have to be extremely careful in judging, in evaluating, in appraising the situation.

References

- Dreze, Jean and Sen, Amartya. 1998. **Indian Development Selected Regional Perspectives** .A study prepared for the World Institute for Development Economics Research of the United Nations University (UNU/WIDER). Delhi, Oxford Press.
- D’Lima, Hazel and Gosalia, Rima. 1992. **Street Children of Bombay**. A Situational Analysis. Study Conducted for Ministry of Welfare, Government of India and UNICEF. National Labour Institute (Child labour Cell), Noida.
- Fraser, Nancy. 1989. **Unruly Practises; Power Discourse and Gender in Contemporary Social Theory**, P.144, and UK: Polity Press
- Haq, Mahbub ul. 1995. **Reflections on Human Development**. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Loughhead, Susan and Mittal, Onkar. 2000. **Urban poverty and Vulnerability in India: A Social Policy Perspective**. Social Change: March-June, Vol.30, Nos.1&2.
- Naidu S. Usha and Kapadia R. Kamini. 1984. **Child Labour and Health. Problems and Prospects**. Tata Institute Of Social Sciences, Mumbai.
- Nayar, U.S. 1991. **Work Patterns of the Girl Child**. The Indian Journal of Social Work, Vol. LII, 1.

Nayar, U. S. and Anil Kumar. 1994. **Correlates of Sex Ratio: A Study in Gujarat**, Govt. of India. (Mimeo).

Naidu, Ratna. 1990. Old cities, **New Predicaments, A study of Hyderabad**, New Delhi : Sage Publications.

Sengupta, Chandan. 2000. Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Mumbai. **Urban Poverty and Vulnerability in India. Nature, Dynamics and Trends.** A National Report Prepared For Urban Poverty Research Programme by Oxfam (India) Trust.

UNDP, 1999. **Human Development Report.** Oxford University Press.

Watkins, Kevin. 1995. **The Oxfam Poverty Report.** Oxfam, UK and Ireland.