

## **The Poverty Debate**

**Dr. Maliha Fawad**

Head of Philosophy Department (R)  
Kinnaird College for Women  
Lahore, Pakistan

Poverty is a complex, cross-disciplinary, multi-dimensional concept requiring analyses of problems raised in the domains of ethics, political science, economics and other social science disciplines. At the same time, it has emerged as a critical issue in the contemporary world. The concept itself originates in social ethics considered to be an essential component of political philosophy, economic theory and philosophical research. The essence of the concept lies in poverty being a state where norms of fairness and justice are violated (Asselin & Dauphin 2001). As we move on to more important issues relating to equity and justice, welfareism and culture of poverty we land right in the midst of moral consideration of poverty. (Little 2003, pp. 1-35, McNeill & St. Clair 2009, pp. 30-62). ). When equity and justice are viewed from a political perspective, re-distribution of resources and provision of equal chances become empowerment issues that are highly relevant fields in political philosophy for developing a theory of poverty (Miller 2010). The social contract theory, Rawls' political liberalism (Rawls 1993), Pogge's human rights thesis (Pogge 2002) and capabilities approach of Sen (2001) and Nussbaum (2003) are all issues of universal generality relevant to a political theory of poverty. Socioeconomic perspective is equally important to understand poverty (Sen 2002). Since poverty is inextricably rooted in social and economic conditions, unequal access to financial resources and social services impinge on problems related to economic deprivation, social exclusion, social choice and distributive justice, etc.

The multidimensionality of poverty as a complex phenomenon based on an interlocking network of multi-disciplinary ethical, political, social, economic and demographic factors is very much reflected in the way the concept of poverty has evolved over the years. The ongoing debate regarding how to account for different facets and dimensions of poverty and the settings of poverty lines have also taken many twists and turns in their historical perspective. It has moved from the early debates on income issues to minimum standards of living (1970s), from the concept of 'social exclusion' (1980s) to the idea of general well-being (1990s) and the more recent criteria of deprivation in the global context. As has been pointed out by Shaffer (2008), the expanding concept of poverty has seen, in its wake, a shift from physiological to social deprivation. (p. 195). Another strand that dominates the contemporary debate is global poverty espoused by two prominent philosophers of our time: Peter Singer (2002) and Thomas Pogge (2002). This has given the concept a trans-national reach and a relevance bringing the debate about poverty within the precincts of global organizations and world institutions.

### **1. BASIC INCOME CRITERIA**

Income or consumption based poverty standards were developed during the early years of 20<sup>th</sup> century with a focus on nutrition, shelter, clothing and other physical needs (Rowntree 1901, 1918). The poverty line corresponded directly with the consumption basket containing the basic necessities of life. "Poverty, at that time, meant unhygienic housing conditions, a stingy diet, insufficient protection from the weather and vulnerability to income shocks." (Niemi 2011, p. 24). A broadening of the basic needs thus redefined poverty as a failure to meet the minimum living standards prevailing in a society. An extended set of basic needs, then, included those provided by society, e.g., health, education, etc. The changing perception of how poverty is visualized and what are the prevalent minimum standards of living impinge upon what measures are adopted for poverty eradication. These are also important indicators to judge the success or otherwise of an economic system and government policies, e.g., when Gross National Product (GNP) per head become a macro-economic indicator of income.

Poverty is generally defined as the lack of sufficient financial resources to cater to the basic needs like food, shelter, clothing, etc. Absolute poverty is the constant measure of income threshold below which a certain segment of population is unable to afford basic goods and services. In other words, when poverty is measured by a fixed standard (e.g., a certain number of calories as the minimum intake to sustain a human body) that remains constant, it is called absolute poverty measure. The minimum income threshold, indeed, varies from country to country; hence absolute measure of poverty is relative to the region or country where it is applied. Social context, on the other hand, plays a crucial role in measuring relative poverty which is also indicative of income inequality in a given society. Despite there being a sustained economic growth, the uneven distribution of wealth and unequal increase in income across the population always keeps a segment of society below the average income threshold and the standard of living prevailing in a society. Relative poverty measures the extent to which a household's financial resources falls below an average income threshold for the economy. A section of the population is

designated as poor when they fail to come up to a certain minimum threshold considered to be the public standard enjoyed by those not considered to be poor.

They may enjoy all the basic necessities of a healthy lifestyle; yet in relative terms they are poor because they fall short of the accepted minimum standards of a given society. In a general sense, absolute poverty is defined as a complete lack of resources to sustain life, while relative poverty refers to the inadequate lack of income when compared to the average standards living. Keeping in view the progress made in richer countries in terms of access to technology, transport, health care, housing etc, it makes more sense to apply relative poverty lines to such countries. That's because the populations there need access to more services (internet, political participation, jobs, health, recreation, and banking) in order to be part of their society. For the poorer countries though, an absolute approach of poverty seems necessary, at least to ensure that the most basic needs are addressed. It is exemplified in the 2 dollar a day criterion of basic income in such countries. Relative poverty, on the other hand, is defined in terms of the society in which an individual lives and which therefore differs between countries and over time. Absolute poverty and relative poverty are both valid concepts. The concept of absolute poverty is that there are minimum standards below which no one anywhere in the world should ever fall. The concept of relative poverty is that, in a rich country such as the US, there are higher minimum standards below which no one should fall, and that these standards should rise if and as the country becomes richer.

According to (Niemietz 2011), the relative measure of poverty has played a dominating role in shaping the poverty debate (p. 30). Ruling out the absolute measure of poverty seems valid in the sense that needs are context specific, although one can argue that there is not much difference between relative poverty and inequality or relative deprivation. Relative poverty, however, cannot be synonymously equated with relative deprivation, a term coined by Runciman (1966) to indicate the unmerited income gaps perceived by the less well off in the society. Neither does relative deprivation preclude a high level of inequality as is the case in relative poverty. Against the World Bank (1975) assumption that income inequality decreases as income grows and poverty declines, separate inequality indicators measurements and conceptual definitions have been developed with region specific distribution. Notwithstanding the variety of its causes and how it is distinctly perceived, relative poverty, like inequality, remains principally a function of income distribution. When relative poverty is defined as economic inequality in the context of a society income distribution metrics like Gini index or **Theil-index** are used to measure income inequality among the population of a country or world at large (Cowell & Flachaire 2006). Relative poverty standards seem to indicate economic and social distance, underscoring inequality while comparing with the rest of the society. It also implies that poverty reduction can be commensurate with the change in the income distribution status.

In 1990, the World Bank classified those living on less than \$1 per day to be living in extreme poverty. The World Bank's upward revision of the poverty line brought it to \$ 1.25 and \$ 2 in 2008. The measure was worked out on Purchasing Power Parity (PPP) terms worked out on the basis of 2005 prices of goods basing the poverty line as equivalent for what one could purchase with 1 or 2 dollars in the United States. In contrast, the current poverty line for the US is estimated to be \$10,830 for a single person and \$22,050 for a family of four (O'Brien & Pedulla 2010). Ravallion (2002) rightly supports the claim made by Reddy & Pogge (2002) that the rather conservative estimate meant to evaluate income poverty of all persons equally across the globe and on the basis of a single threshold of real consumption was flawed and irrelevant, and was arbitrarily chosen without a clear conception of poverty. Such blatant disregard of issues beyond income poverty (such as severe deprivation of basic human needs like clean water, health care, housing, education, etc.) leads to lop sided growth perpetuating more and more inequality. It is true that the revised poverty line estimated at \$ 1.25 is the mean of the national poverty lines for the 10-20 poorest countries of the world. But, behind these estimates there is a more pervasive poverty in the poorest countries of the world (Chen & Ravallion 2008). But, the concept of absolute income poverty is unable to include the well being aspect of poverty; nor does it take care of the earning capacity and other non-income dimensions of poverty. For example, it can measure consumption poverty but not malnutrition. It can look only for monetary value of poverty line at which the basic needs are accounted for.

It is, indeed, true that lack of financial resources and non-availability of goods and services have all along been the defining categories of the idea of poverty. But, these are also the factors that diminish the role of the poor to participate in the social domain. Their deprivation is contingent upon their poverty. It was, therefore, in contrast to the absolute concept of poverty that Townsend (1979) adopted the idea of a relative poverty measure. He characteristically defined by making a distinction between measures based on low income and those on material deprivation.

In his more recent writings, Townsend (2006) has put the idea in more precise terms by saying that "the determination of a poverty line cannot be based on an arbitrary selection of a low level of income. . ." Claiming that "the multiplicity and severity of different types of deprivation" can furnish the criteria for where the poverty line

could be drawn, he asserts that “the key is to define a threshold of income below which people are found to be thus deprived.” (p. 5). Tracing the concept of poverty back to 1880s, he underscores the ideas of subsistence, basic needs and relative deprivation that underlay its evolution at the international level.

The idea of subsistence that ruled the poverty debate both in the UK and the US for a century, thus, lost its hold with the realization that more than a physical organism, man is a social being that is expected to play certain social roles. In recent years, the classification “absolute poverty” seems to have given way to its amplified version as “extreme poverty.” The concept of absolute poverty fails to take into account the broader quality of life issues or with the overall level of inequality in society. The shift has been necessitated also because of the perception that physical needs are largely socially determined. Recent research on poverty has moved beyond the traditional standards set at the possession of less than 1 or 2 dollars a day by formulating a broader concept than absolute poverty.

It is true that Sengupta’s definition is even wider than the income-consumption based concept of relative poverty as in an earlier Report (2005), he tried to subsume under the definition the notions of lack of basic security and capabilities deprivation as well. People who remain in a state of extreme poverty over a long period of time are classified as victims of chronic poverty and can be said to be socially excluded in relativistic terms. Severe deprivation in the human development scale leads to capability poverty in Sen’s meaning of the term; while social exclusion is a consequence of extreme vulnerability and marginalization that calls for an understanding of poverty from the human rights perspective. Addleman, Middleton & Ashworth (2003) seem right in defining extreme poverty as severe and persistent poverty. In fact, extreme poverty would only have any real social meaning if it was persistent. The idea of persistent poverty brings with it the negative overtones of culture of poverty reminiscent of subcultural patterns of Black American family dynamics blamed as the cause of poverty rather than its results. However, one may find other sub-cultural patterns in South Asia, for example, where religious teachings may be equating virtuosity with a state of poverty.

## **2. MATERIAL DEPRIVATION, SOCIAL EXCLUSION**

Exclusion is a concept that refers to dynamic, multi-dimensional processes driven by unequal power relationships interacting across economic, political, social and cultural dimensions and at different levels including individual, household, group, community, country and global levels. It results in a continuum of inclusion/exclusion characterized by unequal access to resources, capabilities and rights. Social exclusion takes place when someone is left out of mainstream society, deprived of opportunities for participation in economic, social and civic processes. The notion of social exclusion was developed in industrialized countries (most notably France in the 1970s) to describe the processes of marginalization and deprivation which can arise where processes of economic and social transformation render ‘traditional’ systems of welfare and social protection inadequate or obsolete. It has been defined as “the process through which individuals or groups are wholly or partially excluded from the society in which they live”. da Haan & Maxwell (1996). Hickey & du Toit (2007) have criticized the exclusion discourse for being residual rather than relational aspects of poverty, “thus detaching poverty analysis from an understanding of how power relations within society underpin poverty. Some have argued that the concept of social exclusion is starting to displace that of exploitation in explanations of how people are impoverished, or “actively underdeveloped.” (p.5). It is, however, a contested criticism and it can as well be argued that not only can social exclusion account for economic and socio-cultural processes of impoverishment, but also that it adds concerns with social inequality to longstanding concerns with poverty.

In a state of material deprivation, an individual or a household is denied access to material goods that are typically available to other members of the society. There is a general agreement that being poor does not merely imply a lack of sufficient monetary resources. It is also a reflection on exclusion of an individual from regular standard of living of the society he belongs to due to lack of monetary and non-monetary resources (Townsend 1979). It is not simply the collective lack of material possessions such as housing, durables and the capacity to afford basic requirements of life. Other dimensions of the social exclusion phenomenon like health care, hygiene, employment, education and social participation are also part of the material living conditions. Berthoud & Bryan 2011, p. 137) have rightly pointed out that calibrating an income poverty line on the basis of material deprivation is relatively less problematic. However, a strong set of assumptions covering the whole range of a variety of consumptions is made a precondition to arrive at the actual measure of poverty. The prerequisite is essential to ensure an adequate measure of societal income standards for material deprivation criteria. This is what Hick (2012) demands when he advocates for consideration of a wider range of dimensions in this regard. It is obvious that contemporary debate is moving towards an analysis of poverty as a multi-dimensional phenomenon (Nolan & Whelan 2011).

Nolan and Whelan’s (1996) reformulation of Townsend’s definition of poverty is of interest here. By redefining poverty as “exclusion from the life of the society owing to a lack of resources” (pp. 2, 115), they seem to imply that the poor are to be identified by using a dual consumption/deprivation and an income criterion. “. . . exclusion is to

be measured directly, together with an income criterion to exclude those who have a low standard of living for reasons other than low income” (Nolan & Whelan 1996, p. 115-116).

Perry (2002) and others reframed the definition to characterize the poor as not having adequate resources to lead a minimum acceptable life in the country in question, i.e., lacking the necessities which society regards as essential. The material deprivation indicators referring to both the lack of resources and social exclusion, when understood at a deeper level, takes account of both the conceptual and the empirical aspects of poverty. However, most studies have argued that populations identified as income poor or materially deprived do not perfectly overlap (Perry 2002, Bradshaw & Finch 2003). Differing degrees of poverty shown by different measures make the overlap problematic needing further research to analyze the factors underlying the relationship between them.

Social exclusion in the context of material deprivation has appropriated a considerable space in the multiple areas of poverty debate. In the contemporary scenario, it has also an extensive relevance to the related debates on equity and equitable access to resources, goods, services and opportunities. The causes of social exclusion are traceable to multiple dimensions of deprivation like social structures, cultural norms, expectations, etc. manifesting itself in the form of inequalities in both the developed and the developing countries. Such inequalities may be seen between the rich and the poor as well as in degree of inequality among the poor themselves. It is known to have a critical impact on the disadvantaged, the powerless and the vulnerable among the population due to their low income, gender, ethnicity, religion, unemployment and other dependency syndromes. These social phenomena may be due to diverse causes and may have different consequences for different population groups. The power dynamics that propels social exclusion is reflected in the peculiar population stratification in a specific society is further accentuated if the disadvantaged are denied access to education, political participation and other avenues of social mobility.

The concept ‘social exclusion’ was first used by the French writer Rene Lenoir (1974) in *Les exclus*. Considered to be the real European innovation, many European organizations and social scientists have developed social political bench marks to track progress against exclusion (Silver & Miller, 2003, p.3). In due course of time, it has extended its reach and is being increasingly used in Latin America, Asia and Africa and forms part of the programs of such world organizations as the ILO, United Nations, UNESCO, World Bank, and European Union. It is, therefore, understandable that diverse shades of meaning and connotations are attached to the concept “social exclusion” in different cultural settings and policy frameworks. Hence, there is diversity in ‘social exclusion talk’ and policy debates across industrialized countries and developing countries (du Toit 2004). For example, exclusion of minority groups from mainstream of society is to be perceived differently where poverty is the mainstream denying rights of citizenship to the majority of the people. In the developed countries, on the other hand, it touches the domains of social welfare and social justice.

Shaffer (2008) looks at the social exclusion approach as a shift in the poverty debate from the physiological to the social (p. 196). He explains his contention further: “The social exclusion approach connects closely with issues of citizenship and social integration and their associated resource requirements.” (p. 197). Social exclusion results from violation of the demands of social justice in two ways: (i) it conflicts with equality of opportunity and (ii) the inability to participate effectively in the political and social life. In this way, social solidarity is also undermined. Hickey & du Toit (2007) have aptly remarked that the idea of social exclusion “can help contextualize poverty in social systems and structures. The social exclusion approach insists that poverty should be understood as a social phenomenon.” (p.2). The focus on social reality and social analysis brings in the domain of culture and political economy. Politics is another dimension touched by the social exclusion phenomenon. Political aspects of exclusion include the denial of political rights such as political participation, freedom of expression, equality of opportunity, etc.

### **3. POVERTY AS CAPABILITY DEPRIVATION**

In *Development as Freedom* in his chapter “Poverty as Capability Deprivation” Sen (1999) refuses to narrow poverty to a combination of welfare measures and threshold poverty lines alone. “Poverty can be sensibly identified in terms of capability deprivation; the approach concentrates on deprivations that are intrinsically important.” (p. 87). Shifting the emphasis away from means towards ends, he asserts that: “What the capability perspective does in poverty analysis is to enhance the understanding of the nature and causes of poverty and deprivation by shifting primary attention away from *means* (and one particular means that is usually given exclusive attention, viz., income) to *ends* that people have reason to pursue, and, correspondingly, to the *freedoms* to be able to satisfy these ends.” (p. 90). Individually, we are “inescapably qualified and constrained by the social, political and economic opportunities that are available to us.” (pp. xi-xii). So, the focus has to be on what people can or cannot do as opposed to what they have. . Poverty severely constrains one’s ability to exercise one’s capabilities. In his later writings also, Sen (2009) remains convinced that we should shift our focus from ‘the means of living’, such as income, to the ‘actual opportunities a person has’, namely their functioning’s and capabilities (p. 253). Drawing a

clear distinction between the actual opportunities, or capabilities, a person has, and his income, he terms the former to be intrinsically important, the latter being merely a means to such opportunities, having only an instrumental and a contingent status (Sen, 2009: p. 233)

Over a period of 20 years or so, the novel capability approach adumbrated by Sen has emerged as the leading alternative to the ongoing poverty debate. Stressing the suitability of wellbeing as a general concept, he rejects utilitarianism based on economic welfareism and Rawls' primary goods as well as utility, liberty and commodities. The idea of wellbeing or how well a life is going encompasses the idea of what people are actually able to be and do. Functionings or 'states of being or doing' are not the same as the commodities employed to achieve them. Capabilities are valuable functionings that one has the freedom to access and choose. To answer the questions: Which Functionings Matter for the Good Life and how people are performing in terms of capability? we first need to determine which functionings matter for the good life and how much, Sen refuses to give a list of capabilities. However, Sen (1999) provides a set of underlying determinants of the relationship between people and commodities that can help in such an evaluation (pp. 70,71):

- *Individual physiology*
- *Local environment diversities*
- *Variations in social conditions*
- *Differences in relational perspectives*
- *Distribution within the family*

The global-local mix inherent in the above evaluation criteria of the capability approach makes it highly suitable for application across political, economic, and cultural boundaries.

Sen's interdisciplinary and humanist formulation of capabilities approach has led to the emergence of human development paradigm giving man centered poverty reduction agenda a global focus. The impact is very much reflected in the annual Human Development Reports showing a new development perspective by increasing human freedom and measuring poverty "not by the yardstick of income alone but by a more comprehensive index... the human development index- reflecting life expectancy, literacy, command over the resources to enjoy a decent standard of living...for capturing the many dimensions of human choices" (UNDP 1990). As pointed out by Alkire (2005), it gives a "considerable reach and depth" to the new understanding of poverty. (p. 125).

Within the academic community too, Sen's capability approach has attracted a lot of attention of philosophers seeking to redress vagueness and under-elaboration in his theoretical formulations. Alkire's Participatory Approach to Evaluating Capability Expansion, Anderson's Justice as Equal Capability of Democratic Citizenship and Alexander's Capability as Freedom from Domination are some of the significant attempts to elaborate and add to some of the important dimensions of Sen's capability approach. However, the most well-known and influential of such attempts had been the one made by the feminist philosopher, Martha Nussbaum. As against Sen's emphasis on freedom, her account is motivated by a concept of human dignity with the minimum requirements of justice threshold so that everyone must be entitled to each capability at least to this degree by their governments and relevant international institutions. While agreeing generally with Sen's arguments for capability approach, she asserts that "they do not take us very far in thinking about social justice." (Nussbaum 2003).

Nussbaum is of the firm belief that in order to operationalize the capability approach we need to formulate "a definite list of the most central capabilities . . . a set of basic entitlements without which no society can lay claim to justice." (p. 36). These entitlements have been listed in an earlier work by Nussbaum (1999, 2000) as bodily health; bodily integrity; senses, imagination and thought; emotions; practical reason; affiliation; other species; play; and control over one's environment. While Sen advocates the capability approaches as a tool to evaluate how people are doing, he suggests that the list along with the precisely located threshold should be debated and incorporated into national constitutional guarantees, international human rights legislation and international development policy. Before taking such a consequential decision, one must address the inherent vagueness in the definitions of the entitlements so that they can be clearly specified for particular political societies for their unique circumstances. For Sen, the capability approach as such was (deliberately) too underspecified to endorse just one single list. But, Nussbaum's position also suffers from a number of weaknesses. There is always the risk of some bias creeping into the selection of particular capabilities or entitlements. When capability approach is incorporated into policy at the national and international levels (as Nussbaum seems to demand), value of capability will be decided by the people who will ultimately be affected by the policies. Thus, to be successfully operational, the capability approach will have to be grounded in relevant social and political theories. Even if Nussbaum's list of entitlements is taken to be highly abstract, general and universal in nature, her list is sensitive to culture and context, it will have to be translated into more specific lists according to the demands of the contexts. One must, however, give credit to Nussbaum for making a clear distinction between the justification and implementation aspects of his theory, conceding the latter as subject to democratic deliberation and decision by those concerned (Nussbaum 2004).

Nussbaum (2003) has been quite categorical in claiming that “both Sen and I connect the capabilities approach closely to the idea of human rights.” (p. 36). Sen (2005) is, however, of the view that: “The concepts of human rights and human capabilities have something of a common motivation, but they differ in many distinct ways (p.151) and concludes that “human rights and capabilities — go well with each other, so long as we do not try to subsume either entirely within the other. (p.163). Sen’s reluctance to identify capabilities essentially required for a just society, however, is for Nussbaum a hurdle in taking a clear stance on social justice.

Sen (2005) seems to have banked upon a similar line of argument when he asserted that “despite the tremendous appeal of the idea of human rights, it is also seen by many as being intellectually frail — lacking in foundation and perhaps even in coherence and cogency.” (p. 151). However, while enumerating the advantages of capabilities language, a Nussbaum (2003) makes an even more consequential claim that “it is not strongly linked to one particular cultural and historical tradition, as the language of rights is believed to be.” (p. 39).

Since its adoption in 1948, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights has been credited with addressing many contemporary issues relating to social justice. Its international intent and mechanism are so designed as to cut across national, cultural and religious boundaries. The advocacy of social justice and distribution of wealth by the proponents of the capabilities approach, however, specifically takes into account freedoms, opportunities and choices that clearly reflect people’s personal, social and economic conditions. Here, there is a clear focus on individual’s ability to transform opportunities and capabilities into functionings thereby giving us a new perspective on poverty, inequality, development, etc. No one can deny the intrinsic worth of human rights as enshrined in the charter; but their worth is more that of legal injunctions mostly directed at the individuals and having little to do with public collective rights. The goals of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights are more likely to succeed in the contemporary world if these are taken up in the pluralistic and pragmatic perspective of the capabilities approach. This is especially so in the case of poverty. When human rights-based approach views poverty as lack of empowerment, it becomes an issue of dignity, value of life, equality, self-esteem and self-consciousness, proportionality and bodily integrity. The capabilities approach centers on the realization of human potential, relating to the freedoms that all individuals identify with their well-being. It is easy to see that capabilities thesis can strengthen human rights as the theoretical paradigm and public framework for development.

#### ***4. Pogge on Global Poverty and Human Rights’ Violation***

There is no doubt about the fact that poverty is one of the greatest hurdles in fulfillment of human rights in the world. In this perspective, poverty implies the absence of an individual’s right to a basic set of capabilities like good food and health as well as participation in social, cultural and political life of the community. In a state of poverty these basic human rights remain unrealized. In spite of tremendous progress in economic and technological spheres in recent years and enormous affluence in the enlightened West, rapidly increasing number of people in the Sub-Saharan Africa, South Asia, East Asia and Pacific and in Latin America and the Caribbean continue to suffer from extreme poverty. According to the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization estimates as many as 870 million people of the 7.1 billion people in the world were suffering from chronic undernourishment in 2010-2012. Poverty seen as a violation of human rights underpins the moral judgment that in a world rich in resources and enjoying the comforts of prosperity denial of basic amenities to a large segment of the world population is a testimony to widespread injustice. There is a common perception among the global poor that International Monetary Fund (IMF), The World Bank and other transnational institutions dominated by the rich of the world have played a key role in generating poverty through their Structural Readjustment Policies (SAPs) leading to reduced spending on health, education and development.

There is a general acceptance that the globally rich have an obligation to the world’s poor. Such an obligation, in the normative sense, is more strictly applied when it relates to harming others than benefitting those who have not been harmed by us. The critical question that emerges in this context is: “Are the affluent of the world, individually or collectively, instrumental in harming the global poor by causing them poverty?” An ethically less significant question is about the distinction between harming and failing/refusing to help those who suffer from extreme poverty or who are worse off than us. In the backdrop of theories of distributive justice adumbrated by John Rawls and Robert Nozick, Thomas Pogge incisively queries the dilemmatic situation:

“How can severe poverty of half of humankind continue despite enormous economic and technological progress and despite the enlightened moral norms and values of our heavily dominated Western Civilization? Why do we the citizens of the affluent Western states not find it morally troubling, at least, that a world heavily dominated by us and our values gives such very deficient and inferior starting positions and opportunities to so many people?” (2003, p. 3).

Pogge has consistently held the view that global poverty is to be understood in the context of human rights violation by the rich countries of the world. (Pogge, 2002, 2005a, 2005b & 2007). He dilates upon it further and asserts that “by shaping and enforcing the social conditions that foreseeably and avoidably cause the monumental suffering of global poverty, we are *harming* the global poor – or to put it more descriptively, we are active participants in the largest, though not the gravest, crime against humanity ever committed.” (Pogge 2005a, p. 33).

The crux of Pogge’s argument lies in his assertion that we must shun the tendency to think about global poverty in terms of helping the poor and concentrate more on how the affluent and their governments impose a global order that causes extreme poverty. His thesis, therefore, does not aim at justifying general obligation to the poor of the world either in the meaning contained in egalitarian distributive justice nor in terms of Peter Singer’s consequentialism as reflected in his “Famine, Affluence and Morality.” (1972).

Pogge has rejected the rather controversial moral bindingness of positive duties to eradicate poverty in favor of negative duties not to harm and cause severe life-threatening poverty because the latter is moderate, less demanding and widely shared conception of justice. The positive duties of helping the global poor, for him, are contingent upon the negative duties not to cause global poverty by directly contributing to the injustices the poor are being subjected to. Thus, the negative duty is defined by Pogge as a duty to ensure that others are not unduly harmed through one’s conduct and distinguishes it from the positive duty to benefit the poor and save them from harm.

The negative duties argument brings together in Pogge’s thesis his ideas regarding world institutional order, human rights violations and global justice. For him, the enforcement of harmful institutional rules violates human rights and serves to perpetuate injustice and extreme poverty. In this regard, he makes a statement that tries to link causally the global institutional order with the massive poverty in the world:

“Dominant Western countries are designing and upholding global institutional arrangements, geared to their domestic elites that foreseeably and avoidably produce massive deprivations in most of the much poorer regions of Asia, Africa, and Latin America.” (Pogge 2002, p. 23).

While taking note of the human rights deficit as a result of the ruling global order, the harm it has done is defined in a rather restrictive manner:

“First, we are harming the global poor only if our conduct sets back their most basic interests – the standard of social justice I employ is sensitive only to human rights deficits. Second, I am focusing on human rights deficits that are causally traceable to social institution”. (Pogge 2002, p. 26.)

This provides Pogge the ground to emphasize our responsibility to promote institutional reform and to formulate his idea of a minimally just alternative global order. These remedial duties in Pogge’s institutional framework can incorporate this minimalist constraint of human rights, not to harm without disqualifying social and economic human right.

An important outcome of Pogge’s view is that collective responsibility of the policies of the developed world for violating negative duties makes every citizen responsible to compensate for the harm caused. The causal relation between the global institutions and poverty in the world imply a proportion between the harm caused and the extent of duty to the global poor. In continuation of this stand, he formulates his minimalist normative position by assuming that human rights and justice involve only “specific minimal constraints - more minimal in the case of human rights - on what harms persons may inflict upon others” (2002a: 13). Intended as a dual constraint on both the conduct and the institutions that cause severe poverty, Pogge hopes to elicit widespread support for his characterization of severe poverty as a human rights violation. How does Pogge hope to establish a minimally just global order? Procedurally, there can be a plausible argument for elimination of gross irregularities in how basic rules are applied. A fairly minimal account of harm, however, does not cohere with the claim that most of global poverty is due to a procedurally unjust global institutional system. While on the one hand he seems to draw on the Western liberal tradition making the well-off stringently obligated not to harm the poor, on the other hand he assigns extensive obligations to the affluent for eradication of poverty. The requirements of his minimalist thesis become demanding given the institutional understanding of negative duties, upholding just institutions and interactional duty not to cause direct harm. It is, thus, possible to infer a fairly maximalist conclusion about our obligations to the poor from Pogge’s minimalist normative premises.

A number of research studies deeply critical of Pogge’s “Leap from State to Individual Responsibility” have appeared in recent years. (Steinhoff 2012 & Montero 2010). Quite a few objections to his concept of collective responsibility appear to be quite valid. One major criticism of Pogge’s position centers on his failure to distinguish between harm caused by the global institutions and the harm caused by other aspects of international politics and the domestic policies of particular states. He has quite effectively criticized explanatory nationalism that purports to explain the world poverty exclusively in terms national and local factors including corruption, repression and

indifference to the interest of the poor. Nevertheless, there is some merit in Reitberger's (2008) claim that Pogge's one dimensional analysis fails to "distinguish between cases in which global institutions contribute to poverty and cases in which global institutions have no particular effect on poverty or possibly even reduce the incidence of poverty, but fail to eliminate it." (p. 381). The world institutional order is a form of governance based on negotiated compromises with weak implementation mechanisms that may not be very effective in the face of authoritative decisions by tyrannical states. There may be powerful actors operating at the individual state levels to exploit and manipulate the world institutional order for purposes harmful to poverty amelioration. It is, indeed, also true that explaining a complex phenomenon on the basis of one or two factors is an oversimplification. The history of political thought, however, is witness to the fact that justice has always been a local concern within a state. The rights debates which originated with the classical concept of justice and social contract also remained largely focused on the question of distribution of justice within a single society.

Pogge was, indeed, well aware of the fact that much poverty results from state action, particularly by bad governance. He accepts the fact that "most severe poverty would be avoided . . . if the national government and elites of the poor countries were genuinely committed to good governance and poverty eradication." (2007, p.460). Since he is pretty sure that the prevailing state of affairs in the poor countries is not likely to change for the better from within, he proclaims "that most severe poverty would be avoided despite the corrupt and oppressive regimes holding sway in so many poor countries, if the global institutional order were designed to achieve this purpose." (2007, p. 46). He does not specify how he intends to neutralize the power of the vested interest in his new global world order and their potential to vitiate the new scheme proposed by Pogge. One needs to realize fully the depth and range of poverty causing factors locally operating in the form of networks of alternative institutional systems running parallel with the state government systems. With local institutions in an advanced state of decay in many developing countries, and without a just, responsible and representative leadership, how can Pogge hope for an easy passage and implementation of his international institutional reform initiative?

A variety of responses is available in the writings on poverty that furnish insights into the problems identified by Pogge. One reaction is that of Patten (2005) who responds to Pogge's *World Poverty and Human Rights* with an ironic question; "Should we stop thinking about poverty in terms of helping the poor?" Or should we accept the *Life Boat Earth* analogy so passionately rejected (from a Kantian perspective) by Onora Nell (1975) because letting others die in this way is tantamount to killing, and so is a violation of fundamental rights. Can we agree with Hardin's *Lifeboat Ethics* (1974) and advocate withholding surplus food from a stowaway on a lifeboat and let others starve to death. The view stands in stark contrast with the Singer (1972)-Unger (1996) thesis that the affluent of the world should give away their entire surplus for poverty alleviation.

Notwithstanding the moral dimensions of the contrary views, or in the case of middle of the road Fishkin (1982) in his minimal altruism (p. 3), no one can deny that "the importance of the kind of life we have set out to live is greater than the amount of suffering preventable by depriving ourselves of the means to live it." (Quoted by Fishkin, 1982, p. 77). So, it may not be a big surprise if for some of us "Giving become a vice"! (Neera Badhwar, 2006). Jennifer Trusted may be right in asserting that "in this context actions speak louder than words" (1995, pp. 296-297), but ethical dimension remains equally important. One may have a stronger feeling of compassion and benevolence for one's near and dear ones. But, moral duty to help others in need is more of a matter of responsibility and obligation. The moral worth of an action lies in acting according to the principle of duty, though it may have causes and consequences. But, when this duty and responsibility are exercised at the institutional level, or by states charitable and misanthropic ideals are subordinated to the more pragmatic goals relating to national and regional interests. Thus, aid giving agencies are motivated by a variety of complex reasons to help the poor and they may have other motives than those purely guided by moral obligation and duty.

### **5. Defining Poverty in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century**

How we define poverty is critical to political, policy and academic debates about the concept. It is bound up with explanations and has implications for solutions. Value judgments are involved. Definition thus has to be understood as a political as well as a social scientific act and as such has often been the source of controversy. There is no single 'correct' definition. However, as we shall see, most researchers now accept that any definition has to be understood, at least in part, in relation to particular social, cultural and historical contexts. Look at the institutionalization of poverty within social and political norms and systems, its legitimization within political discourse and by the political elite, and the failure of the poorest of the poor to gain political representation. The different ways in which extreme forms of poverty and the extremely poor are represented on political bodies contributes significantly to understanding the dynamics of poverty reduction as well as poverty reproduction.

During the last 100 years or so, the research on poverty has touched upon a wide range of subjects including absolute and relative poverty, income thresholds, income inequality and deprivation, social exclusion, capability deprivation and the role institutional world order as a cause of severe poverty and violation of human rights. By its very spread, the poverty debate reflects the wide range of dimensions and variety of subject areas one needs to cover in order to arrive at a comprehensive definition of poverty. Income and basic needs criteria, social exclusion, capabilities deprivation, human rights violation and the institutional approach to poverty eradication are the salient features of how poverty has been understood as a concept and what measures are considered essential for its amelioration. The moral, the social and political contexts of the phenomenon has made it imperative to discuss with reference to human rights, social justice and global transnational institutions.

Over the years the issue of poverty has grown in complexity and consequently it is becoming more and more difficult to find appropriate solutions. It is no longer a straightforward condition of lack of resources, low income and destitution. There are no easy to identify parameters readymade to measure poverty of a group or a community. Poverty is now embedded in a thick description of diverse social, historical and political phenomena which culminates in what may be called a culture of poverty. The questions now being asked involve: who are the poor, why are they poor, why the poor lack the will to work, should they be treated merely as passive recipients of aid, what should be a proper response to the perennial problem of poverty. A multi-disciplinary, close appraisal of the phenomenon of poverty gives an insight into a multi-variate origin and growth of poverty across the globe. The experience of being poor has grown out a multiplicity of possible lacks and shortcomings ---- material, moral, social and metaphorical---defined against what constitutes prosperity and success. Poverty is produced through processes of social differentiation and shaped by the politics of wealth and power, both globally and locally.

In other words, while the end results of poverty-producing processes are scarcity, suffering and social exclusion - poverty is formed within cultural frameworks and has to be examined in its proper social and historical context.

A comprehensive definition of poverty cannot ignore the economic, the social and the human rights aspects of the concept. When we intend to grapple with the issue of poverty eradication, the issue needs to be placed in its true historical, political and social context. The globalism that has emerged in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century demands reliable answers to the following critical questions:

- i. How do the relationships between the world institutions, state and civil society relate to poverty and prosperity in different settings?
- ii. What are the constraints and alternatives for reducing poverty?
- iii. How has our knowledge about poverty changed over time, and how have these different perceptions influenced policy?

It will need an in-depth historical analysis, using qualitative, ethnographic research techniques to investigate the specific ways in which global poverty has developed and how is it represented on the social plane. The role of state agencies, the NGOs, the other transactional agencies and international institutions along with their poverty reduction strategies and agendas will have to be evaluated within the context of poverty reduction. The diverse and dissimilar poverty producing structures in countries like, for example, Guatemala, Uganda and Pakistan can only be understood when we study their peculiar relationships between the elite classes and the poor, their cultural constructs, and how they relate conventions with modernity.

A new dimension in defining poverty needs to be focused. What poverty is taken to mean fundamentally depends on who asks the question, how it is comprehended, and who responds to it. Most of the poverty debate is spearheaded by the non-poor, the empowered and the socially included. It is imperative to see what the poor, the deprived and the dis-empowered themselves say about their poverty, how they perceive their exclusion from society and how they feel about the affluent. It is high time that their perception of reality is allowed to be counted and become an important segment of the poverty debate.

## **References**

- Alkire, S. (2005). Why the Capability Approach? *Journal of Human Development*, 6, 115-135
- Asselin, Louis-Marie & Dauphin, A. (2001). Poverty Measurement: A conceptual framework, IDRC MIMAP Research Program, Canadian Center for International Studies and Cooperation. Retrieved from [www.pep-net.org/fileadmin/medias/pdf/asselin/Poverty.pdf](http://www.pep-net.org/fileadmin/medias/pdf/asselin/Poverty.pdf)
- Badhwar, N. (2006). International aid: When giving becomes a vice. In E. Paul, J. Paul & F. Miller (Eds.) *Justice and Global Politics*, Cambridge University Press, pp. 69-101.
- Berthoud, R. & Bryan, M. (2011). Income deprivation and poverty: A longitudinal analysis, *Journal of Social Policy*, 40(1), pp. 135-156.

- Bradshaw, J., Davis, A., Smith, N. Oldfield, N., Cusworth, L. & Williams, J. (2008). A minimum income standard for Britain: What people think, A Joseph Rowntree Foundation Report, Layer Thorpe, and York Publishing Services.
- Chen, S. & Ravallion, M. (2008). *The developing world is poorer than we thought, but no less successful in the fight against poverty*. Policy Research working paper; no. WPS 4703. Washington D.C. The World Bank. Retrieved <http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/2008/08/11680409/developing-world-poorer-thought-no-less-successful-fight-against-poverty>.
- Cowell, F.A. & Flachaire, E. (2006). Income distribution and inequality measurement: The problem of extreme values. Retrieved from [hal.archives-ouvertes.fr/docs/00/17/60/29/.../Cowell\\_Flachaire\\_06.pdf](http://hal.archives-ouvertes.fr/docs/00/17/60/29/.../Cowell_Flachaire_06.pdf).
- de Haan A and S. Maxwell. (1998) 'Editorial: Poverty and Social Exclusion in North and South', *IDS Bulletin*, 29(1): 1-9. (European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions, 1995, quoted in de Haan and Maxwell, 1998: 2.).
- Du Toit, A. (2004). Social exclusion discourse and chronic poverty: A South African case study, *Development and Change*, 35(5), pp. 987-1010.
- Fishkin, J.S. (1982). *The Limits of Obligation*, New Haven, Yale University Press.
- Food and Agriculture Organization. 2010. The State of Food Insecurity in the World 2010. Retrieved from <http://www.fao.org/docrep/013/i1683e/i1683e.pdf>
- Food and Agriculture Organization. 2012. "The State of Food Insecurity in the World 2012. Retrieved from <http://www.fao.org/docrep/016/i3027e/i3027e00.htm>
- Gasper, D. (2002). Is Sen's Capability Approach an Adequate Basis for Considering Human Development? *Review of Political Economy*, 14, 435-461.
- Hardin, G. (Sep. 1974). Lifeboat Ethics: the Case against Helping the Poor, *Psychology Today*, September 1974.
- Hick, R. (2012). The capability approach: Insights for a new poverty focus, *Journal of Social Policy*, 41(2), pp. 291-308.
- Hickey, S. & du Toit, A. (2007). Adverse incorporation, social exclusion and chronic poverty, *Working Paper 81, Chronic Poverty Research Center (CPRC)*, Institute for Development Policy & Management, School of Environment and Development, Manchester University, UK. Retrieved from: [http://www.chronicpoverty.org/uploads/publication\\_files/WP81\\_Hickey\\_duToit.pdf](http://www.chronicpoverty.org/uploads/publication_files/WP81_Hickey_duToit.pdf).
- Lenoir, R. (1974). *Les exclus un français sur dix*, Paris, Editions du Seuil.
- Little, Daniel (2003). *The Paradox of Wealth and Poverty: Mapping the Ethical Dilemmas of Global Development*, Boulder, Colorado, Westview Press.
- McNeill, D. & St. Clair, A.L. (2009). *Global Poverty, Ethics and Human Rights, The Role of Multilateral Organizations (Rethinking Globalizations)*, Abingdon, Oxon, Routledge.
- Miller, Richard W. (2010). *Globalizing Justice: The Ethics of Poverty and Power*, Oxford, Oxford University Press.
- Montero, Julio (2010). Do affluent countries violate the human rights of the global poor? *Global Justice: Theory Practice Rhetoric* (3), 22-41.
- Nell, O. (1975). Lifeboat earth, *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, 4(3): pp. 273-292.
- Niemietz, Kristian (2011). *A New Understanding of Poverty: Poverty Measurement and Policy Implications*, London, the Institute of Economic Affairs.
- Nolan, B. & Whelan, C.T. (1996). *Resources, Deprivation and Poverty*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Nolan, B. & Whelan, C.T. (2011). *Poverty and Deprivation in Europe*, Oxford, Oxford University Press.
- Nussbaum, M. C. (1999); *Sex and Social Justice*, Oxford University Press
- Nussbaum, M. C. (2000). *Women and human development: The capabilities approach*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.
- Nussbaum, M. C. (2003). Capabilities as fundamental entitlement: Sen and social justice, *Feminist Economics*, 9(2-3), 33-59.
- Nussbaum, M.C. (2004). "On Hearing Women's Voices: A Reply to Susan Okin." *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 32 (2): 193-205.
- O'Brien, R., and Pedulla, D. (2010). "Beyond the Poverty Line." *Stanford Social Innovation Review* (Fall, 2010). Retrieved from [http://www.ssireview.org/articles/entry/beyond\\_the\\_poverty\\_line](http://www.ssireview.org/articles/entry/beyond_the_poverty_line)
- Patten, A. (2005). Should we stop thinking about poverty in terms of helping the poor? *Ethics and International Affairs*, 19(1): pp. 19-27.
- Pogge, T.W. (2002). *World Poverty and Human Rights: Cosmopolitan Responsibilities and Reforms*, Cambridge, UK, Polity.
- Pogge, T.W. (2005A). Severe poverty as a violation of negative duties, *Ethics and International Affairs*, 19(1), 55-81.
- Pogge, W.T. (2005B). Real world justice, *The Journal of Ethics*, 9, 29-53.
- Pogge, T.W. (2007). Severe poverty as human rights violation, in Thomas Pogge (ed.) *Freedom from Poverty as a Human Right*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 11-53.

- Ravallion, Martin (1992). *Poverty freak: A Guide to Concepts and Methods*. Living Standards Measurement Papers, the World Bank.
- Ravallion, Martin (2002). How *Not* to count the poor? A reply to Pogge and Reddy, retrieved from [siteresources.worldbank.org/.../HowNot\\_toCount\\_thePoor\\_Reply\\_toRed](http://siteresources.worldbank.org/.../HowNot_toCount_thePoor_Reply_toRed)
- Rawls, J. (1993). *Political Liberalism*, New York, Columbia University Press.
- A Theory of Justice*, rev. ed., Harvard University Press, 1999.
- Reddy, S. & Pogge, J. (2002), How *Not* to Count the Poor, The World Bank, Retrieved from [books.google.com/books/about/How\\_Not\\_to\\_Count\\_the\\_Poor.html?id...](http://books.google.com/books/about/How_Not_to_Count_the_Poor.html?id...)
- Reitberger, Magnus (2008). Poverty, negative duties, and the global institutional order, *Politics, Philosophy and Economics*, 7(4), 379-402.
- Room, G. (1997). Poverty and social exclusion: The new European agenda for policy and research. In Graham Room (Ed.). *The Measurement and Analysis of Social Exclusion: Beyond the Threshold*, Bristol, the Policy Press.
- Rowntree, B.S. (1901). *Poverty: A Study of Town Life*, London, Macmillan.
- Rowntree, B.S. (1918). *The Human Needs of Labour*, London, Nelson.
- Runciman, W.G. (1966). *Relative Deprivation and Social Justice*, London, Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Sen, Amartya (1999). *Development as Freedom*. New York, Random House Inc.
- Sen, Amartya (2002). Social justice and the distribution of income (60-85), in A.B. Atkinson and F. Bourguignon (Eds.), *Handbook of Income Distribution* (Vol.1), Elsevier Science.
- Sen, A. (2005). Human Rights and Capabilities, *Journal of Human Development* 6(2), 151-166.
- Sen, A. (2009). *The Idea of Justice*. London, Allen Lane
- Sengupta, Arjun (2005). *Report* submitted to the Human Rights Commission, Geneva, Ref. No. E/CN.4/2005/ 11 February, 2005.
- Sengupta, Arjun (2010). Human rights and extreme poverty, *Economic and Political Weekly*, XLV (17), PP. 85-93.
- Shaffer, Paul (2008). New thinking on poverty: Implications for globalization and poverty reduction strategies, *Real-world Economic Review*, 47, 192-231.
- Silver, H. & Miller, S.M. (2003). Social Exclusion: The European approach to social disadvantage, *Indicators*, 2(2), pp. 1-16. Retrieved from: [http://www.brown.edu/Departments/Sociology/faculty/hsilver/documents/silver\\_and\\_miller-european\\_approach\\_to\\_social\\_disadvantage.pdf](http://www.brown.edu/Departments/Sociology/faculty/hsilver/documents/silver_and_miller-european_approach_to_social_disadvantage.pdf)
- Singer, P. (1972). Famine, affluence and morality, *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, 1: pp. 229-243
- Singer, Peter (2002). *One World: The Ethics of Globalization*, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Steinhoff, Uwe (2012). Why 'we' are not harming the global poor: A critique of Pogge's leap from state to individual responsibility, *Public Reason*, 4(1-2), 119-138.
- Townsend, Peter (1979). *Poverty in the United Kingdom: A survey of household resources and standards of living*, Middlesex, Penguin.
- Townsend, Peter (2006). What is poverty? An historical perspective in Dag Ehrenpreis (Ed.) "What is Poverty? Concepts and Measures," *Poverty in Focus*, International Poverty Center, UNDP. Retrieved from [www.ipc-undp.org/pub/IPCPovertyInFocus9.pdf](http://www.ipc-undp.org/pub/IPCPovertyInFocus9.pdf)
- Trusted, J. (1995). Rich and poor. In Brenda Almond (Ed.) *Introduction to Applied Ethics*, Oxford, Blackwell: pp. 289-304.
- Unger, P. (1996). *Living High and Letting Die: Our Illusions of Innocence*, Oxford, Oxford University Press.
- UNITED NATIONS DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMME (UNDP). (1990) *Human development report*, New York; Oxford, Oxford University Press for the United Nations Development Programme.
- UNITED NATIONS DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMME (UNDP). (2011) *Human Development*, Retrieved from: <http://hdr.undp.org/en/humandev/origins/>
- World Bank (1975). *The Assault on World Poverty*, Washington, World Bank.