

# Perpetuating poverty - what stops progress?

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## **INTRODUCTION**

There is often a fundamental distinction bordering on hostility drawn between the three terms that form the basis for this conference. There is no doubt that poverty is the antithesis of development and prosperity, but it might also be argued that development and prosperity are in many instances built on and require levels of poverty. That is, as we use the terms “development” and “prosperity” currently the pursuit of these objectives almost inevitably is associated with poverty, whether understood in a nations state context or in a global context. It as if the pursuit of development, progress and prosperity requires poverty.

I want to explore in this paper some of the issues associated with what might be perhaps one of the most fundamental issues in current work on poverty, both research work and policy work, namely:

### ***WHY DOES POVERTY PERSIST?***

It is a question which might be considered to be almost irrelevant and, in many dimensions of current political and policy thinking, is not even seriously considered unless it is to focus the blame for poverty on the poor. People are poor because:

They spend their money unwisely;

They drink too much or gamble their income;

They have too many children;

They don't know how to budget;

They have too many children;

They don't make the effort to provide for themselves or to improve their situation.

These, and many of the other arguments that are frequently advanced, are well known and frequently serve as the answer to the question posed above. They are of course answers which fit comfortably with the individualist and neo liberal frameworks which have shaped both policy work and the associated political and ideological dimensions of that for the last fifteen years, both in New Zealand and internationally. At the risk of running ahead of the argument that I want to develop in this paper, they are arguments which are both necessary for the pursuit of that agenda and fundamental to its delivery. In other words, the neo liberal framework requires, and is premised, on a focus on the errant behaviour of individuals and the responsibility, the

exclusive responsibility, of those individuals for their own poverty and the continuation of that poverty. After all, if they were sufficiently motivated and resourceful they would be able to be involved in the process of progress and reach prosperity.

In an article written a number of years ago, Herbert Gans the American sociologist, set out a range of reasons and functions which poverty serves in a modern society. These included such issues as undertaking the work that no one else would carry out, ensuring that the place was kept clean, doing the menial and uninteresting tasks that others did not want to do etcetera. It is an interesting and thoughtful commentary, in which I hasten to add Gans is not suggesting that such arguments and reasons are acceptable. Rather, he is attempting to locate an understanding of the nature and causes of poverty within the broader political, economic and ideological context within which it is located and persists. In the context of the focus for this gathering, it is an attempt to located poverty within notions of progress, prosperity and development.

## ***POLITICS, POVERTY, POWER***

In a recent book on the politics of ageing, Vincent (1999) identifies five questions that need to be asked about the politics of any given situation. These include:

“Who are the different kinds of people involved?

What is the broader historical and social context?

Who dominates and how is this achieved?

What is the process whereby some people become dominant and others dominated?

What part does age play in this?” (Vincent, 1999: 19)

If we change the word “age” to “income” in the last of these questions, then, they are questions that are equally applicable to the issues facing this discussion. In other words:

- ❖ identifying the interests involved
- ❖ identifying how the processes of poverty are developed, maintained and supported
- ❖ identifying the processes whereby there are economic advantages for some and economic disadvantages for others

are fundamental to the core question for this paper.

Let me turn more directly now to dimensions of exploring those questions. The first issue that needs to be touched on briefly is to draw out a little the distinction between a range of terms that are commonly used interchangeably. In particular, terms such as “poverty”, “inequality”, “deprivation”, “disadvantage” and the currently internationally popular phrase “social exclusion,” are often used as if they mean exactly the same or very similar. Such a confusion is to say the least unfortunate and indeed allows those with some interest in the development and maintenance of poverty to loosely conflate the terms and engage in cheap sloganising around such phrases as “the politics of greed”, “dumbing down”, “the politics of envy”, “political correctness” etcetera. It is difficult to go too far beyond the description of poverty set out twenty years ago in the seminal work of Peter Townsend when he described

poverty as the shortage and inadequacy of resources to attain the living standards generally regarded as acceptable by the majority of the population. It is that focus which guides the thinking that forms the core of this paper.

Poverty is the lack of financial resources to participate in and belong to the society in which we are located, to slightly paraphrase the terms of the 1972 Royal Commission on Social Security. It is interesting to note the use of a slight variation on this phrase in the latest Social Security Amendment Bill. What then does that mean in the New Zealand context. A range of research studies over the last twenty years or thereabouts has identified many of the circumstances facing those who are poor (Bagnall 1994; Barwick 1994; Craig 1992; Easton 1993; Easton 1994a; Easton 1994b; Easton 1995; Gunby 1996; Jamieson 1998; Krishnan 1995; Livingston 1996; Mackay 1994; McGurk 1993; New Zealand Council of Christian Social Services and the Salvation Army 1994; New Zealand Network Against Food Poverty 1999; Olds 1991; Solomon 1990; St John 1996; Stephens 1995; Stephens 1999; Waldegrave 1996a; Waldegrave 1997; Wilson 1995, December; Wilson, et al. 1997; Young 1995). The picture painted in these studies is interestingly reflected in the recent publication by (Crampton 2000). These include inadequate food, unsatisfactory, worn and inadequate clothing, housing that is inappropriate to family and personal needs, an inability to join in recreational activities enjoyed by others (whether children or adults), an inability to participate in normal social, recreational and cultural activities, an inability to provide children with the educational and recreational opportunities which their levels of development and the lives of their peers require. It is reflected in standards of living and of food consumption which is both unhealthy and indeed in some instances dangerous to health. The report last year from the New Zealand network against food poverty highlighted many of these points in its examination of the quality of nutrition and food available to New Zealand families.

The work by Charles Waldegrave and his colleagues shows further dimensions of this in such fundamental areas again as food, ability to visit a doctor or dentist (and then pay for the subsequent prescription). It is manifest in the traumatic and stressful pressure which is placed on families, reflected in the experiences of one of the participants at the hearings of the Peoples Select Committee in 1991. The sole parent of adolescent boys commented to that inquiry that she found herself having to lock the fridge to protect the remains from the previous evenings meal from her son when he returned home from school in her absence. If the fridge was not locked, then that evenings meal would disappear. The list above could go on at some length and be fully documented drawing on many of the extensive and significant studies of the last 20 years. The central point is that poverty means a living standard and life opportunities which are unacceptable to the community at large and unacceptable in New Zealand in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

## **WHO THEN ARE THE POOR?**

The work that has been done in New Zealand for a number of years consistently points in the same direction. Whatever the nature of the academic and research debates over the measurement of poverty and its precise definition, all of the literature clearly leads to identification of a range of groups which are overly represented

among “the poor”. Thus, lone parents, families with more than two children, a significant group of the elderly, Maori, women, Pacific Islands families and an increasing proportion of the Asian communities are overly represented among “the poor”. Alongside of this is an increasing proportion, at least in an historical sense, of the poor who are in paid work. The historical assumption that paid work led to people moving out of poverty is no longer sustainable. The consistent picture from the food banks statistics clearly demonstrates this, with a steady 10-12% of people coming to food banks for food parcels being in paid work. It is not my intention here to go through the detailed statistics as to the proportions of these different groups living in poverty. Others have done that extensively (Easton 1994a; Easton 1995; Krishnan 1995; Stephens 1995; Waldegrave 1996b). Rather, I want to elaborate a little on what is common about the particular populations. That is, what is it that provides a common thread and a common denominator among these groups? If we can begin to draw out that common denominator it might be possible to then focus directly on the question that forms the focus of this paper.

## **WHY ARE THEY POOR?**

If we return to those five questions from Vincent that I identified earlier in this paper some of the answers to the question: “Why are they poor?” begin to emerge. All of the groups that I have identified above share one core common feature, namely: they are comparatively powerless. I use the word ‘comparatively’ deliberately, to emphasise that they are not completely powerless. There is some interesting work beginning to emerge from overseas research and practice about the ways in which the poor are able to exercise some power. However, it is important in looking at the possibilities that this holds to keep a clear focus on the vast differences in power. Otherwise, it is easy to move to a line of argument which focuses on the individual characteristics of “the poor”, and move to victim blaming.

When we explore the relationship between the dominant and the dominated, to use Vincent’s term, and when we begin to identify the processes around that, then all of those groups, many of which overlap significantly, are powerless when we look at the distribution of power within contemporary communities. Whilst I am focusing here on the New Zealand context, a similar argument, without too much difficulty, could be developed in an international development context. Their powerlessness, or to be more precise comparative powerlessness, relates to the ways in which resources rewards and incentives are distributed in contemporary societies. Such resources, rewards and incentives go to those who exercise power, that is control and/or dominance over others and over the institutional mechanisms and processes within the society.

The groups which I have identified above as being significantly over represented among the poor have at best limited influence in this society and limited influence over the allocation mechanisms within the society, irrespective of the range of dimensions of those mechanisms. As I have noted above, the issues are compounded by the overlapping categories, that is, by the ways in which some people find themselves located in more than one category – the female lone parent who is Maori or a Pacific Islands person is the clearest illustration of this. Critics of the poor often highlight the individuals from these groups who are able to “escape,” “make it”, using

such examples to demonstrate their point that others who were similarly well motivated could do likewise. We know that the issue of poverty is not about managing money. The evidence is very clear that some who are poor get into debt while others do not. This is not a reflection of their failure but should be a source of wonderment that it does not happen more extensively given the impoverished circumstances in which the poor are forced to live. The same argument needs to be applied to those who “escape poverty”. Just as we wonder about how it is that people manage often on such inadequate resources, so too should we wonder how it is that those who have such limited resources are from time to time able to significantly advance their own personal position. As a friend and colleague has commented on different occasions as I have tried to explore this question, the answer probably lies in luck. Rather than asking why others have not pursued the same opportunities and not shown the same energy, initiative and positive attitude, it would be much more appropriate to be asking what is required to enable others to do likewise. Those who have been lucky (to use my friend’s comment) should not be used as a jack hammer with which to assault the rest of “the poor”. Such assault might serve the interests of those with economic, political and ideological power, but it certainly does not assist those struggling to feed their children and to make ends meet.

## **SOME CONCLUDING REFLECTIONS:**

Let me try now to bring some of these reflections together. There are three propositions that I have been trying to work through this paper. First, that the issue of poverty is an issue of power and powerlessness. Second, that the maintenance of poverty is a reflection of the way in which power, opportunity and resources are allocated and the processes with which some are able to secure advantage for themselves while others are consistently disadvantaged. The third point, and the one which I want to draw through in these concluding remarks is to explore then what is the way forward?

Considerable energy has been devoted in the last twenty years in trying to identify the nature of poverty, the causes of poverty, the extent of poverty and the characteristics of poverty in both New Zealand and internationally. Much of this work has been focused around trying initially to get the issue of poverty on the policy and political agenda and then to keep it there while others tried to deflect it by focusing on the characteristics and behaviour of “the poor”. This research and policy work has been important in helping to keep the issue alive and helping to continue to remind politicians and senior bureaucrats about the existence of poverty and indeed it has been interesting in recent times to see senior public servants acknowledge a connection between poverty and child abuse for example, a connection which was previously energetically and vigorously denied as staff were forbidden in the department to use the term “poverty”.

The way forward in terms of the answer to the question “ Why does poverty persist?” is then to keep asserting the ways in which the processes, rewards and incentives are allocated within society as the fundamental issue underlying poverty. Simply identifying the ways in which the poor are faced with second rate lives and opportunities will not in and of itself move forward towards a society in which poverty disappears. It will help that process, but unless such work is associated with a wider exploration and development and articulation of arguments about the

underlying causes then the work will be interesting but will not enable us to move forward. After all, as one prominent British researcher in the field said a number of years ago, the purpose of doing poverty research is in fact to change the extent and nature of poverty. Certainly, if development, progress and prosperity are to be goals then it is absolutely fundamental that we acknowledge the processes which construct and sustain poverty and confront those with some of the energy which in the last twenty years we have used to grapple with other equally divisive and destructive social processes such as racism and sexism.

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