Towards a better understanding of the causes of poverty in Africa in the late twentieth century

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The international community has designated 1996 as the year for the eradication of poverty. This is a tough challenge. What is achievable is an increased understanding of the complexity behind such a challenge. (UNICEF 1996)

Introduction

The most significant issues facing African states in the late twentieth century relate to the environment of poverty, scarcity and inequality in which the vast majority of their peoples live. The World Bank has called the deterioration of economic, social and human conditions across the continent since the 1970s 'the greatest sustained development failure of the century'. The 1980s undoubtedly made the African continent the poorest region in the world, where the short term future is of a further increase in the number of people living in absolute poverty by the year 2000. On this basis, as the Australian Agency for International Development (AusAID) pointed out in its 1995 review of Australian aid to Africa, 'by 2010 the majority of those living in absolute poverty in the world will be living on the African continent'.

The failure of current development strategies to halt this process of impoverishment, at a time - the mid-1990s - when the international community has reaffirmed its commitment to poverty eradication as a central objective of development assistance, suggests we may not yet have properly understood the causes of poverty itself. The year - 1996 - designated by the international community for the eradication of poverty is perhaps an appropriate time to return to this question.

Contemporary African poverty is now an important area of research. Some of the agreed causes of contemporary poverty, and the increased immiserisation of large sections of African society in the 1990s, include: the violence of internal conflict; natural disasters, and especially the great droughts of the last 25 years; the enormous movements of populations who have fled war and drought; and the increasing pressures of population on scarce and depleted resources. Addressing these problems is seen as the first step back from such human catastrophes.

In contrast, there is no genuine consensus as to the causes of poverty arising out of what The Economist calls the 'dismal trend' downwards which, at the end of the 1980s, had left the great majority of Africans poorer than they had been in 1965. This lack of consensus emerges from the contemporary debate on the narrower question of the (causes of) the African economic crisis itself and the strategies adopted for recovery. That debate offers useful insights into the prevailing notions across the international community of the causes of African poverty. It began with the publication of the World Bank's 1981 Report, Accelerated development in sub-Saharan Africa, and has been directed in essence towards the structural adjustment programmes which have been laid down by the international community as the necessary solution to the economic crisis and the political liberalism that provided 'the basic doctrine of the Report'. Through the 1980s, the resulting dialogue focused largely but by no means exclusively on the economics of recovery and has maintained strong ideological undertones. African governments have themselves been powerful (if not often effective) critics of Bank prescriptions, proposing alternative strategies. By the end of the 1980s, however, most governments had accepted the necessity for, and had adopted, adjustment programmes; although many it seems have not always implemented them to the extent required by donors. In the mid-1990s popular opinion across Africa undoubtedly continued to attribute the decline in material standards of living to structural adjustment and the debate was far from closed.

The parameters of this debate were broadened in 1989 by the publication of the World Bank's Report, Sub-Saharan Africa: From crisis to sustainable growth. Described by Richard Sandbrook as 'seminal' and an 'exceptionally clear and authoritative account of the ascendancy of liberal-democratic, free enterprise model for Africa's recovery', the 1989 Report shifted attention to what is now termed 'governance', and to the need for political and administrative reforms to facilitate economic recovery. It was concerned with human rights and justice, and multi-party electoral systems as well as administrative reform, and reflected a firm ideological commitment to liberal democracy. 'Good government' in this process created, in Mick Moore's words, 'a new orthodoxy that is likely to be with us for the foreseeable future'. Reflecting the changed ideological environment of the post-cold war world, the emphasis on pluralism incorporated into the dialogue questions about the relationship between democracy and development.

The preoccupation of the Bank's 'adjustment and good government' approach to the African crisis has been with economic decline and recovery. Poverty is seen as the
consequence of that economic decline. 'Reducing poverty ... the most important goal of development, is particularly difficult in sub-Saharan Africa because of slow economic growth, rapid population growth and a fragile resource base'. The key to the eradication of poverty is therefore seen to lie in economic growth. Some changes of approach have in fact occurred; as Green and Faber point out, it is short-sighted to 'see the World Bank and IMF as monolithic in approach' or to ignore the dynamics of their own policy process. Recognition of the fundamental importance of 'safety nets' for the poor, for example, was won by the campaign for 'adjustment with a human face' initiated by UNICEF which forced attention to the poverty consequences of government cuts in health, education and agricultural services, in already fragile economies.

The 1990 World Development Report on poverty recognises the need for a 'comprehensive approach to poverty reduction' which combines 'well-targeted transfers and safety nets' with the basic strategy to 'promote productive use of the labour of the poor and provide basic social services for them'. Nevertheless the Report concludes that 'Attacking poverty ... is a task for economic policy in the large' and continues to give primacy to economic growth. Moreover, the causes of poverty are seen to be economic and linked to the past economic policies of the post-colonial African states, albeit combined with adverse changes in the international economy. A review of Australian aid to Africa summed up the position simply as 'internal policy mistakes and adverse external developments [which] combined to produce the deterioration.' This emphasis also appears in the analyses of poverty itself. Thus the World Bank's 1994 Zambia poverty assessment begins with the statement: 'The poverty crisis in Zambia is a result of longstanding inappropriate policies compounded by severe external shocks.' The Poverty assessment for Kenya asserts: 'The lack of sustained economic growth is the primary cause of continued income poverty in Kenya.'

It is with this interpretation of the causes of and the cure for poverty that this paper is concerned.

The causes of African poverty: Economics is not enough

No one would dispute the importance of the impact of economic decline experienced across Africa through the 1970s and 1980s on the well-being of the African peoples. Nevertheless there are several reasons for questioning whether this is a sufficient explanation of poverty in the 1990s. Poverty associated with physical want has a long history in the pre-colonial as well as colonial eras. Moreover there is considerable evidence that structural poverty has been a cumulative phenomenon in the twentieth century; a trend that flowed on into the independent state. The World Bank's Zambia poverty assessment refers to two kinds of poverty: permanent and temporary. Ghai and Alcantara remind us of the impact of the great depression of the 1930s. Bequelle and van der Hoeven pointed in 1980 to the extent to which 'the better off and more powerful groups are in a better position to pass on their acquired wealth and status to their children', whereas 'the poor ... find it increasingly difficult to overcome their poverty and even worse are compelled to transmit it to their children'. In this context Ghai and Alcantara's argument becomes all the more significant:

although it is customary in much of the literature on the 'social impact of adjustment' to view the process of adaptation as a temporary phenomenon - interrupting a single, linear process of modernisation which should resume its normal course once current difficulties are overcome - such an assumption should be subject to considerable scrutiny.

Such scrutiny requires that we situate the changes over the past 20 years in the context of the globalisation with which the African economic crisis has coincided. Global integration since the 1960s appears quite clearly to have intensified poverty as well as inequality, and to have increased the rich-poor gap within as well as between countries (and not only in Africa). Furthermore, the new levels of scarcity are a consequence not only of past mistakes but of current reforms, as recognition of the need for safety nets acknowledges.

We need also to understand that the roots of poverty lie deeper in the past than is frequently acknowledged. The 1972 ILO report on employment, incomes and equality in Kenya, one of the most influential of the reports linked to the ILO's World Employment Programme, located the origins of the unemployment and gross inequality of the late 1960s in the colonial years. Similarly the stagnation in agricultural production which has been central to the larger economic crisis has its roots in colonial agrarian change and the model of agricultural modernisation that provided the basis of the commercialisation of agriculture after the second world war. Peasant society became locked into 'modern agricultural systems' as commodity production in the 1950s boomed. Agricultural modernisation bypassed the poorest peasant households, however, and rural differentiation and inequalities increased. Changing modes of production resulted in changing social relations, and thus the social processes reproducing poverty. The consequences in terms of environmental change and unsustainable agriculture are also now well known. Much of the explanation of current ecological crisis focuses on population pressures and these have undoubtedly been critical. Nevertheless the mode of agricultural production has itself been fundamental to environmental degradation. The pre-capitalist (traditional) cultivator sought to adapt to nature and to grow a wide variety of crops to reduce risk. Modern large-scale agriculture seeks to control the environment and to grow a few crops. The outcome over the past 50 or more years has been the loss of diversity and the steady erosion of the land in a great many parts of a very diverse continent. This makes the continuity of agricultural policy between the colonial and post-colonial state a critical issue.
In a continent whose soils are poor and the vast majority of the inhabitants small farmers or herdsmen, land has always been crucial for livelihoods. The transition from a land-rich to a land-poor continent has thus been crucial to the process whereby poverty has grown. Iliffe argues that 'land scarcity was slow to breed extreme poverty because many of the landless could sell their labour as wages that at least ensured subsistence'. By the 1990s, Rwanda had nevertheless demonstrated the implosion that may follow where people lack both land and an escape route to an alternative means of survival. Population pressures have undoubtedly been significant in changing the balance between the land and its human and animal inhabitants. More fundamental have been the changes in land use and land tenure, especially in the fertile arable areas, which have reduced access to the poorest levels of society.

Questions about land are questions about resource use and the uneven access to productive resources that lie at the heart of the contemporary crisis of livelihoods. The allocation and use of resources is a matter of policy, so it is significant that structural adjustment strategies at the macro-level have been concerned with trade liberalisation and privatisation, with 'leaner government' rather than with a direct attack on poverty itself, and with creating an environment that will encourage foreign investment rather than empower the poor. While social impact programmes have been introduced, they receive fewer resources than support for private sector expansion. In the process the same privileged levels of society that benefited from the state in the past continue to do so. Policy is predicated on the same notions of development and modernisation that Ghai and Alcantara find wanting, and on the model which Colin Leys located as the root of inequality 25 years ago.

Policy, as the OECD points out, is 'basically a political issue'. We need therefore to situate any inquiry into poverty in its political context and to explore the relationship between poverty and power. Iliffe's discussion of poverty raises the question as to whether numerous Africans in precolonial Rwanda were not impoverished by their lack of political power. Looking back at the changing landscape in Siaya, Western Kenya over the past century, Cohen and Atieno Odhiambo comment on 'the extent to which the image of tropical abundance in the past rested not on nature but on prevalent political conditions'. Amarta Sen's entitlements approach to famine, where 'entitlements systems are beliefs created in political practice about who ought to get what and under what circumstances', makes the same point.

In the context of current notions of good governance, this means focusing on the shift away from the one-party state with the sequence of multi-party elections between 1989 and 1992 on the one hand, and on the issue of donor dominance and conditionality on the other.

The wave of elections that heralded the 1990s ultimately reflected the dissatisfaction of ordinary Africans with those in power and, as Beckman has pointed out, enabled groups to build alliances across class divisions and 'made possible a new popular base'. Competitive party politics ought to enable the poor who constitute the majority to influence policy outcomes. Not everyone agreed on a necessary relationship between multi-partyism and economic recovery, however. Uganda's President Museveni, as outgoing Chairman of the Organisation of African Unity (OAU) in 1991, argued that 'the Western multi-party systems were a result of prosperity not the cause', and that 'some in Africa think that if we have multi-parties we will have prosperity, this is putting the cart before the horse'. Five years later he seemed to have been proved correct. As African states embarked on what was called 'round two of pluralism' multi-party elections had made little difference to the material well-being of the great majority of Africans who, four years earlier, had voted their old leaders out of power. In Zambia, for example, where in 1991 electors had swept President Kaunda from power after some 23 years in office, in 1996, 67 per cent of the population lived in 'households with expenditures per adult equivalent below a level to provide basic needs'. Nine out of the ten southern African states had elections in the first half of the 1990s without any significant impact on either economic recovery or reduction of poverty.

Elections by themselves from this perspective have proved an insufficient base for shifting resources to the poor. Policies on poverty eradication have been influenced in the 1990s less by electoral fortunes than by the international community of donors. The 1980s left African governments more dependent than ever before on a not always enthusiastic international community for assistance to tackle the long-term task of reconstruction as well as the immediate crisis. While African governments have challenged the package of economic reforms imposed upon them in the name of structural adjustment, there is little doubt that most of them had lost control of their policy making process by the end of the 1980s, as shown by Zambia's short-lived attempt to follow her own independent programme from 1987 to 1989. Political conditionality moreover opens the way to what Martin Doornbos sees as 'an increasingly explicit tutelage relation with the countries concerned'. The policy dialogue is therefore conducted between governments, and therefore bureaucrats, rather than between politicians, parties and people. Accountability in this environment is not to the electorate but to the donor community. Moreover, in the post-cold war world the neo-liberal hegemony has meant that debate on the model of development itself has been foreclosed. It is difficult to see bureaucracies, themselves under threat, being able or perhaps willing to reopen it.

What is to be done? The need to think politically within an historical perspective

What is required for a better understanding of poverty in Africa at the end of twentieth century is, as David Goldsworthy urged us to do some years ago, to think (more) politically. We need to focus on the 'questions of the exercise of power' about which Goetz and O'Brien conclude the World Bank is silent. This means focusing our analysis
on the social processes that reproduce poverty that are ignored by the current orthodoxy. We need to think politically about contemporary Africa as it becomes not only more ‘capitalist’ but also more poverty-ridden and more unequal. As in the process we need also to confront the ideological underpinnings of neo-liberal thinking about development in the post-cold war, pluralist world.

At the same time we need to situate such analysis in historical perspective - to use the abundance of rich, social history that policy makers appear still to ignore. In so doing we may come to a better understanding of the causes of poverty, a greater respect for the poor themselves, and realise that growth by itself is not enough to ensure the poor more control over their own lives.

Endnotes

3. World Development Report, 1990, World Bank, Washington, DC, p.5. ‘No task should command a higher priority for the world’s policymakers than that of reducing global poverty.’
4. John Iliffe’s book, The African poor: A history, 1987, Cambridge University Press, draws attention to the work of the International Labour Office (ILO) and the World Bank. For the latter, see especially the Poverty assessments of African borrowing countries carried out 1991-95, and discussed in Anne Marie Goetz and David O’Brien’s, ‘Governing for the common wealth? The World Bank’s approach to poverty and governance’ in IDS Bulletin (Sussex), April 1995, Vol 26(2), p.19 and fns 6 and 7. See also States of disarray: The social effects of globalisation, 1995, United Nations Research Institute for Social Development (UNRISD), Geneva. We need also to bear in mind, as Michael Lipton has pointed out, that ‘we now have systematic analyses of poverty by a wide range of sociologists, and economists, the collection of evidence and the improvements of ways to interpret it for just on a hundred years’, IDS Bulletin (Sussex) 22(4), p.12. Furthermore, the growing body of literature on African social history is an important historical source.
8. Richard Jolly, ‘JASPA-evolution of an approach from employment to basic needs in economics under pressure’, in The challenge of employment and basic needs in Africa. Essays in honour of Shyam B L Nigam to mark the tenth anniversary of JASPA, Oxford University Press. On p.3 Jolly points out, in the context of interpretation of the causes of African economic decline, ‘interpretation always involves a framework of analysis of ideology as well as facts. Such frameworks in development studies have long been recognised to be important but in the interpretation of Africa’s recent difficulties, the frameworks of analysis and their ideological underpinnings have become polarised and opionionated.’
11. See, for example, Zambia Daily Mail, 5 February 1996, for a letter to the editor arguing that the 1996 Budget gave no relief to the poor who were (a) the majority of the population and (b) suffering from the structural adjustment programmes (SAPs) of the Chiluba/MMD Government. See also Profit (Lusaka), May 1995, p.26: ‘As a result of the region’s adherence to the SAP we have declined to a state where 70 per cent of the people live in absolute poverty and this is a very great hindrance to democracy’. For an African academic position, see the two volumes edited by Bade Onimode, The IMF, the World Bank and the African debt (Vol 1), The economic impact, Zed Books Ltd, 1989, and Vol. 2 of The social and political impact, 1989.


30 *Employment, incomes and equality: A strategy for increasing productive employment in Kenya*, 1972, Geneva, ILO, Chapter 6, 'The emergence of the problem'.

31 There is now a large and excellent literature on agrarian change. See, for example, Henry Bernstein 'Agricultural "modernisation" and the era of structural adjustment', *Journal of Peasant Studies*, October 1990, 18(1), pp.3-35; and Sara Berry 'The food crisis and agrarian change in Africa: A review essay', *African Studies Review*, June 1984, 27(2), pp.59-86.


34 See, for example, Ben Wisner 1988, *Power and need in Africa: Basic human needs and development policies*, Earthscan.


43 *Daily Nation* (Nairobi), 23 February 1996.

In recognition of the crucial role that good governance plays in sustainable development, they [donors] are concentrating on countries which are prepared to embrace the policies necessary to promote economic and social development.

48 Goetz and O'Brien 'Governing for the common wealth?', p.19.