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**CONCEPTUALISING POVERTY FOR SOCIAL
DEVELOPMENT IN THE EASTERN CAPE**

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(This paper is still work in progress)

INTRODUCTION

What is poverty or deprivation? If I were to ask this question to ten different people I would get 10 different answers. Poverty means different things to different people. Their responses may be very similar, but there will be differences, depending on the background of each person. Experiences of poverty differ from person to person, from one area to another, and across time. Poverty in India differs from poverty experienced in Canada, and poverty in the USA today is different from the poverty in the USA 50 years ago. Even within the Eastern Cape the experiences of poverty is different: poverty in the Nelson Mandela metro differs from poverty in OR Tambo district.

If one were to consult the Oxford English dictionary (1989), one would find six definitions for poverty. Poverty, and being poor, are described by expressions such as “deficiency in”, “lacking of”, “scantiness”, “inferiority”, “want of”, “leanness or feebleness”, and many more. Saunders (1993) described poverty as the absence of material wealth, but this definition is very much based on the Anglo-Saxon view of poverty. According to Mrs Witbooi from Philipstown in the Karoo (as in Wilson and Ramphela, 1989), “Poverty is not knowing where your next meal is going to come from, and always wondering when the council is going to put your furniture out and always praying that your husband must not lose his job. To me that is poverty.”

The South African Participatory Poverty Assessment (SA-PPA) (May, 1998:38-48) found that the poverty definitions given by the poor differ from that given by the non-poor. The poor characterize poverty as isolation from the community, lack of security, low wages, lack of employment opportunities, poor nutrition, poor access to water, having too many children, poor education opportunities and misuse of resources, amongst other. The non-poor see poverty as a lack of income and sometimes a result of the bad choices by the poor. It is therefore not easy to get a precise definition of poverty that will suit every situation.

RATIONALE FOR DEFINING POVERTY

It may be asked why it is important that we define poverty. Simply, we cannot fight poverty if we have not clarified what we are fighting. Clearly defining poverty will also assist us to accurately measuring our success or failure in reducing poverty. The South African

government address poverty by increasing social assistance to the poor through greater access to education, better healthcare, access to clean drinking water, provision of electricity, and many more. In contrast to this, poverty is mainly measured according to the income or expenditure level of a household. The result of this mismatch could be that government is not having a direct impact on reducing poverty, but “hoping” that measured poverty would be reduced indirectly through higher income and/or lower unemployment.

The rationale for developing a definition of poverty for social development is provided by Wilson and Ramphela (1989) who identified four reasons why poverty is significant:

- i. the damage it inflicts upon individuals who must endure it
- ii. the sheer inefficiency in economic terms, e.g. hungry children cannot study properly, with millions of Rand being “wasted” on ineffective education
- iii. the consequences to society, especially where poverty is the manifestation of great inequality, with the possibility that too great an inequality makes human community impossible
- iv. poverty is often caused by a deeper malaise, e.g. the process that generates wealth in a society, often impoverish others at the same time

This is further emphasized by findings of the participatory poverty assessment approach that the poor “have provided a depth and understanding to the notion of poverty, extending and enhancing narrow consumption- or income-based definitions to include issues such as vulnerability, physical and social isolation, self respect, security and powerlessness.” (Brockelsby and Holland, 1998).

HISTORY OF THE CURRENT DEFINITION OF POVERTY

Poverty was only identified as a serious social ill during the latter parts of the industrial revolution, i.e. 19th century. With the onset of wealth and the creation of the middle class, poverty and inequality became serious issues that were expressed in many ways, such as the books by Charles Dickens. The study of poverty during that time was mainly from a social welfare perspective, as the following definition by Godard (1892:5-6) clearly indicates:

“Roughly, we may define poverty as “An insufficiency of necessities”; or more fully, as “An insufficient supply of those things which are requisite for an individual to maintain himself and those dependent upon him in health and vigour.” And the degree of poverty will obviously be determined by the extent of the insufficiency. Of course, this leads to the further question as to what things are requisite: and it must at once be stated that there is no sharply defined line between necessities and unnecessaries... Obviously, however, an adequate supply of wholesome food and suitable clothing, and a sanitary dwelling, with sufficient sleeping apartments, are amongst the first requisites. To these must be added the means of obtaining some amount of education. Recreation also, ... and leisure to enjoy it ... And freedom...”

During the 20th century poverty became more of an economic development issue, with Mencher (1967: 11) describing that “poverty must be kept independent of the variety of social and economic problems with which it may be associated.” This resulted in the definition of poverty also changing. The measurement of poverty became the overriding influence in defining poverty (Hagenaars, 1991). Poverty was considered as below a certain level of income or expenditure, this threshold being called the poverty line. The result was a clear targeting of poverty by providing some form of income to the poor, considered as those whose income were below the poverty line, in the form of social welfare grants. This is still the practice in many countries in the industrialised world.

The groundbreaking work on functioning and capabilities by Nobel Prize winner Amartya Sen and others on the issue of poverty, especially on poverty in the developing world, has reopened the issue that poverty is more a social welfare issue than purely an economic development issue. The definition of poverty has shifted back to social welfare, as the current definition of poverty by the World Bank (2002) clearly illustrates:

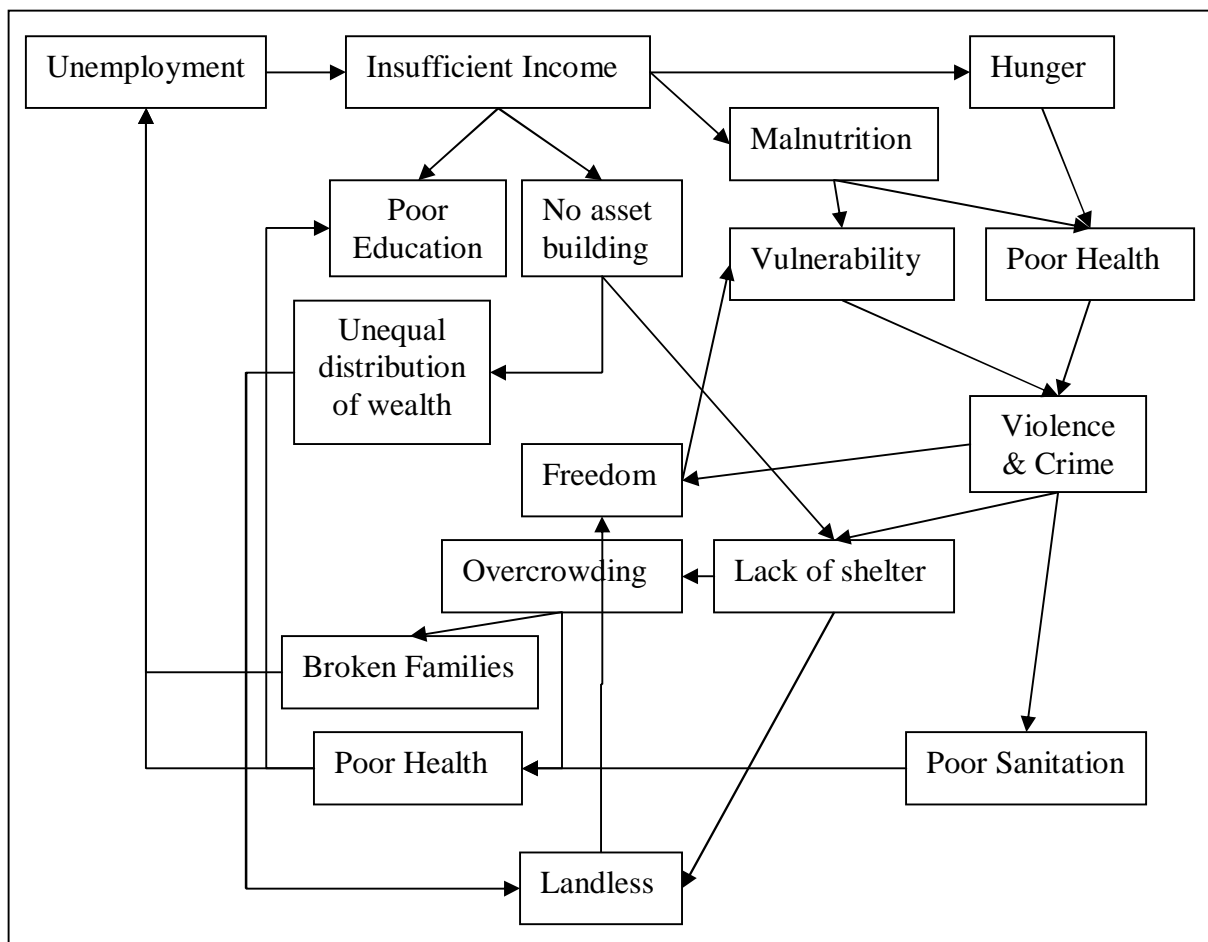
“Poverty is hunger. Poverty is lack of shelter. Poverty is being sick and not being able to see a doctor. Poverty is not being able to go to school and not knowing how to read. Poverty is not having a job, is fear for the future, living one day at a time. Poverty is losing a child to illness brought about by unclean water. Poverty is powerlessness, lack of representation and freedom.”

The challenge that confronts professionals, academics, policy makers, and all others involved in fighting poverty is the issue of accurately measuring poverty within the multi-dimensional framework. The work done by people such as Sen (1976 and 1983), Foster, Greer and Thorbecke (1984), Cerioli and Zani (1990), and Cheli and Lemmi (1995) has greatly contributed to understanding the extent of poverty in a multi-dimensional perspective. However, there is still much more that could be done, especially on the dynamics of multi-dimensional poverty.

DIMENSIONS OF POVERTY

As the before mentioned definitions of poverty clearly indicates, there are several different dimensions of poverty, both material and non-material. These dimensions interact and interlink with each other in a complex manner, as diagram 1 illustrate.

Diagram 1 The complex interaction between the different dimensions of poverty



There are many more dimensions of poverty not listed here, but which may be an important aspect of poverty in the Eastern Cape, such as quality of land, security of tenure, access to capital, status of women, etc.

CURRENT DEFINITIONS OF POVERTY IN THE EASTERN CAPE AND SOUTH AFRICA

The Report on Poverty and Inequality in South Africa (May et al, 1998: 4) defined poverty “as the inability to attain a minimal standard of living, measured in terms of basic consumption needs or the income required to satisfy them.” The Eastern Cape Provincial Growth and Development Plan (2003) have poverty eradication as one of the 6 main objectives, yet it does not define poverty. The focus of the PGDP is on income generation and employment, but as this paper has described, poverty is broader than just this.

CONCLUSION

In developing a definition of poverty that is applicable to the social development of the people in the Eastern Cape, the participation of the poor is extremely important, since only they would know what they consider to be poverty. Once such a definition is developed, methods must be developed to measure the current status, so as to determine whether future policies to address poverty are effective or not. A clearly defined definition of poverty would also help to identify the best intervention strategy in the fight against poverty, focusing effort and resources where it is most effective.

Let us make sure that we cut poverty in the Eastern Cape in half by 2014, not only on paper, but in reality too.

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