



From Correlates and Characteristics to Causes: Thinking About Poverty from a Chronic Poverty Perspective

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Summary. — Poverty and poverty reduction are currently the central concerns of development discourse and policy. Despite recent theoretical advances, poverty analysis continues to be dominated by an income/consumption conception of poverty. We argue for understandings of poverty that go beyond measurement-led conceptualizations to more adequately expose the causes of poverty. Chronic Poverty is one such concept. Its focus on poverty duration and dynamics highlights the forms of social relations that produce poverty, and which are often embedded within political institutions and economic structures. Poverty reduction does not simply require “good” policy: it requires creating the capacity of poorer people to influence, and hold accountable, those who make policies.

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Key words — chronic poverty, social relations, politics, inequality, development theory, social welfare

1. INTRODUCTION

The concept of poverty now occupies center stage in development thinking. The World Bank, the lead institution in the drive for global transformation in the lives and living conditions of people in poor countries, declares itself committed to the “dream” of a “world free of poverty.” This is to be achieved through various combinations of policy initiatives involving state and market, private enterprise, and social protection, intended to meet the needs of individual countries through the involvement of key stakeholders in the design of national poverty reduction strategies (PRS). It remains to be seen whether what is claimed as the more inclusive basis of the PRS process has widened either the terms of debate about what poverty is and how it should be addressed in those countries adopting poverty reduction strategies, or participation in it (Craig & Porter, 2003). This is a pity. The concept of poverty as constituted through development discourse is not at all self evident, ranging from a relatively straightforward notion of income poverty to more recent

philosophically informed meanings encompassing individual capabilities and freedoms.

Despite recent innovations, money metric understandings of poverty as an income or consumption shortfall continue to dominate poverty reduction and development policy analysis. This is driven by advances in what can be measured within a paradigm centered on economics both as a theoretical framework for assessing development policies and as the prime means of effecting development as economic growth (Kanbur & Squire, 2001). Poverty reduction is perceived as the consequence of economic policies and the productive strategies of individuals and households, with poverty as a state into which people fall and from which they can be lifted if their incomes increase. Although participatory poverty assessments have been billed as the means by which such economic understandings of poverty can be extended and deepened, (e.g., Kanbur, 2001), we argue here that the sociological

* Final revision accepted: September 9, 2004.

“thinness” of understandings generated through such approaches renders them complicit in the failure to move beyond the characteristics and toward understanding the causes of poverty. As such, the ways in which poverty is currently represented in development—as an entity to be attacked external to the social relations that generate it—serves to constrict the kinds of policy responses to it that development can manage, both conceptually and as the target of development interventions (Green, 2005). It also contributes to the misrepresentation of poverty and to its perpetuation as an effect.¹

This article argues for the resituation of poverty studies firmly within a sociological tradition that moves beyond the qualitative descriptions associated with participatory poverty assessments to a consideration of the fundamental sociological question of what kinds of social relations produce what kinds of poverty effects.² We argue that current approaches to poverty in development studies have tended to highlight the precipitating causes of poverty at individual and household levels, while underplaying the social relations and categorizations which can contribute to long-term poverty. Recent work which attempts to theorize the persistence of poverty can provide a vehicle for the combination of qualitative and quantitative approaches to understanding poverty, allowing for the identification of intractable and persistent poverty and an entry point for further qualitative investigation and analysis. The concept of chronic poverty, as characterized by duration, is particularly useful, not so much as a means of identifying the poorest, but for highlighting the outcomes of the entrenched social relations that work to produce the bundle of effects that make up chronic poverty. Chronic poverty offers the potential to move the analytical focus of research from correlates of poverty to causes of poverty. By viewing poverty in dynamic terms it helps reveal the social and political processes that make people poor and keep them in poverty.

2. POVERTY IN DEVELOPMENT THINKING

Although poverty has been the focal point of development policies for almost two decades (Finnemore, 1997, p. 208), the recent emphasis on global targets has prompted something of a reappraisal as the concept is deconstructed in order that its component parts may be accu-

rately measured. To achieve the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), institutional mechanisms for monitoring changes in national poverty levels have been established in many countries as part of the infrastructure supporting the poverty reduction strategy (PRS) process. Household income and expenditure surveys, government statistics, and participatory poverty assessments (PPAs) are used to measure the extent and depth of poverty, in terms of income or consumption poverty supplemented by data on *de facto* social exclusion. Within and outside of the relatively narrow confines of these World Bank and aid agency inspired processes a broader debate ensues, involving academics, practitioners and policy makers across a range of institutions about the kinds of methodologies which best capture the scale of poverty and the experience of those categorized as poor.

As indicators of poverty, income and consumption measures have apparent advantages creating what seems to be a clear line between the poor and nonpoor, and providing a rationale for the kind of development assistance—large scale financial transfers pursuing poverty reduction through economic growth—that dominated late 20th century policy. Just as states are assumed to be able to combat poverty at macrolevel through economic growth, this income-based understanding of poverty is scaled down in the assumption that poor households can escape poverty through increasing incomes. Against this policy background, it is not surprising that accounts of poverty have largely focused on households as units of economic engagement (see Bebbington, this collection). For example, the widely used livelihoods approach (Ellis, 2000) as a “toolkit” for understanding how households, assumed to be units of production and consumption, come to have income deficits is useful for helping outsiders grasp the different components of income that rural people have to pull together in order to make a living of sorts. It is less able to grasp the external influences on these disparate components, the extent to which rural dwellers are embedded in regional and trans-national economies and the dynamism and often fragmentary nature of “households” as loci of accommodation, consumption and cooperation (Harris, 1988).

Studies of poor households in a number of different countries and settings have revealed fairly consistent attributes of poverty. Poor households are those which have high depen-

dependency ratios, minimal assets, lack of access to sources of income and may suffer social disadvantage.³ These factors are simultaneously causes and consequences of poverty, which is manifested tangibly in illness, malnutrition, illiteracy, and the inability to access a limited range of very basic goods and services. The kind of poverty which is represented here is fairly extreme, although it is analytically differentiated from destitution (Harriss-White, 2005, this volume). This severity, combined with a tendency to imagine such poverty as predominantly rural and agricultural, reinforces the association between poverty and food shortage, and by extension between malnutrition and poverty. Consequently, evidence of malnutrition, stunting, and weight for height indices are widely accepted as indicators of poverty that at its extreme is represented biometrically.

Such representations of poverty emphasize the effects of extreme poverty on the human body but, in presenting a biological picture of poverty, risk obliterating the humanity and agency of poor people who appear merely as "hordes of vital statistics" (Fanon, 1967, p. 33). Poverty comes to be seen as a lack of resources rather than an absence of entitlements, as an "economic" rather than a political problem. The reduction of poverty to biological effects which can be calculated and improved⁴ distracts attention from the social and personal experiences of extreme poverty, which are simply overlooked in the quest for quantification (Hastrup, 1993, p. 730). This omission matters because although the effects of poverty can be presented as objective, quantified, and hence as the basis for comparisons, poverty is not constituted in the same way at different times and places and by different people. How poverty is imagined and how poverty is experienced varies through society and history, as do the social relations which create it and tolerate its effects (Bauman, 1998, p. 1).

3. POVERTY AS AN EFFECT

Poverty is not a natural fact, but a social experience. The category of the poor is similarly socially constructed. Notions of what poverty is and who the poor are in contemporary rich societies are very different from ideas about what poverty is elsewhere or was in the past, although there are interesting parallels in the ways in which the category of the poor becomes discredited by those considering themselves

outside it. The sociologist Bauman (1998, 2004) has recently argued for the category of the poor in consumer societies to be defined as those excluded from access to the means of participating in the construction of the self through the acquisition and display of consumer goods, not foodstuffs, a definition of poverty a world away from the basic biological needs approach which informs the work of development economists such as Dasgupta (1993, p. 10) and others (Rist, 1997, p. 168). While there are obvious similarities between Bauman's concept of social exclusion and the various incarnations of the capabilities approach, developed by Sen (1981), which view poverty as fundamentally an issue of exclusion and the absence of what others have within society as *de facto* or normative rights and entitlements, the kinds of effects that "poverty" will generate in each case are very different, and arguably not of the same order. It is one thing to be socially marginal and unable to work in a society with welfare provision and access to health care, even if, as in the contemporary United States, this is limited in scope (Adair, 2002). It is quite another to risk death in the event of quite minor illness or child birth simply because one's family lacks the cash to pay the minimal charges for access to public medical care, and because of the poor state of public facilities.

What constitutes "poverty" is neither obvious nor universal. Local categorizations of poverty may be at odds with the normative categories imposed by international and national agencies. These are only able to capture what appear to be characteristics of poverty universally because they focus on what is in actual fact not "poverty" as such but the effects of the social relations that produce it. This explains why studies of "poverty" across different geographical and economic areas reveal virtually identical clusters of associated phenomena in relation to characteristics of the "poor" and the households so classified, ranging from poor health, malnutrition, shortages of cash and food to the inevitable figures on dependency ratios, educational levels, and literacy (Oduro & Aryee, 2003). These effects, which also contribute to the perpetuation of "poverty" in the cycles identified by Dasgupta and others, are fairly predictable in situations where individuals and households who are structurally disadvantaged have no institutional fallback to provide them with support in times of crisis. Identical effects of "poverty" were

reported in London and Manchester among the urban poor in the half century prior to the introduction of basic welfare provision, when households in poor health would use up their limited assets on survival and, through losing access to income opportunities, slide rapidly into debt, then destitution and the likelihood of an easily preventable death (Engels, 1987; London, 2002; Roberts, 1984).

If the "poverty" identified by development seems to refer in practice to a bundle of social and biological effects on people, what about the ways in which development has identified the causes of these effects? Just as studies of poverty have revealed the similarity in the effects of poverty across time and space, so the causes of poverty are represented in development as being similarly related. This similarity is a consequence of the way in which poverty is represented as a phenomenon primarily affecting households within "communities," and within which the causes of poverty are taken to be the range of proximate factors which impact directly on livelihoods. Poor households are thus identified as those likely to have reduced income opportunities, to be headed by a single adult, to have a large number of dependants, for example, or to suffer from inadequacies in access to such inputs as fertilizers and tools, education, draught animals, or credit.

Poverty is increasingly presented as caused by a lack of immediate assets without which households cannot graduate to being nonpoor. This kind of approach is accurate in one sense, in that it explains why individual households or individuals in particular places have less income potential than some of their neighbors do. What it cannot do is take the analysis further and begin to explain why it is that *these* factors become precipitating for certain people in certain situations and contexts, rather than others. If the question is asked from this perspective, the answers become simultaneously more enlightening and more problematic. Take, for example, the case of certain widow-headed households, particularly in South Asia. Poverty as an effect experienced by members of such households, notably the widow herself, is not a straightforward matter of an absence of an input in the form of male labor, or reduced dependency ratios, or the fact that a male household head might have access to a wage as a laborer or migrant worker, or even as a successful farmer. Rather, it is due to the ways in which adult female personhood is constituted as depending on a male spouse for access

to various kinds of rights, including those over what is constituted as "property" (Hirschon, 1984). Widowhood in this situation becomes a negative status defined as a loss of relation to the male household head. Even where a woman is lucky enough to have adult sons who will inherit their father's position, the structure of social relations ensures that the social role of their widowed mother is obliterated through the reallocation of her previous role to the son's wife, as the wife of the household head (Lamb, 2000). Importantly, this social casting of widows as second-class citizens, and the associated processes of asset stripping, is politically institutionalized within customary, statutory, and common law systems that licence and perpetuate such processes of impoverishment.

Poverty as effect is revealed explicitly in this example as the consequence of social relations, which become institutionalized within legal and political systems. But to assert this is merely to assert a truism widely accepted within the disciplines that deal with development. It does not *explain* anything, other than that certain effects are produced by a range of social relations. It does not point to which kinds of social relations are more or less likely to produce such effects, nor for whom. Nor do such accounts explore the specific ways in which social relations that produce "poverty" are contingent on specific and culturally diverse notions about the social constitutions of different categories of persons, about the boundaries of the social and of the kinds of obligations toward others entailed by this positioning. It is these that make widowhood a problematic social category for certain women in South Asia, but not in matrilineal rural communities in Tanzania (Green, 1999), rather than the death of a spouse *per se*. Development studies has yet to prioritize the analysis of the constitution of the social relations that permit poverty as an effect.⁵ The tendency has been to generalize poverty in terms of immediate causes and as generalizable effects. This standardized representation of poverty as the social conditions, rather than the social relations, which produce it has restricted the way in which development studies and related disciplines have been able to grasp the fundamental relation between poverty and society.

4. REPRESENTING SOCIETY

Ironically, recent efforts to grasp the social within development via participatory research

and notions of exclusion to explain the position of the poor have tended to perpetuate the externalization of poverty. Here, the poor, as individuals occupying this category, are represented as somehow on the margins of local and national economy and society. The recent World Bank account of comparative PPAs carried out across a range of countries and published under the title, *Voices of the Poor: Can Anyone Hear Us?* (Narayan, Patel, Schafft, Rademacher, & Koch-Schulte, 1999) adopts this perspective, representing the poor as excluded from both formal and informal institutions. It is this exclusion which restricts the access of poor people to opportunities and resources, which consolidates their poverty. The poor do have their own institutions, but these are often far removed from the institutions to which the nonpoor have access. The solution to poverty thus appears as inclusion. Consequently, the most recent *World Development Report* (World Bank, 2003) states that if the poor are to become less poor, they need to be included in state institutions and that national institutions need to become accountable to poor constituents.

"*Voices of the Poor*" presents the relationship between the poor and institutions diagrammatically. A box containing "poor households" comprising interlinked circles of "women and men" is situated some distance apart from other boxes representing "state institutions" and "civil society organizations," through which access to "opportunity" is mediated. The poor then appear as those marginal to mainstream institutions, occupying a kind of parallel society in which impoverished social institutions limit potential means of engagement with the wider institutional context and hence the "pathway" out of poverty (Narayan *et al.*, 1999, p. 15).

As a representational device, this way of thinking about the poor as enmeshed in a particular kind of relationship to a wider, non-poor, society seems to offer insight into the causes of poverty. This is not the case. Its conceptualization of the relation between poverty and society distorts in quite fundamental ways. Firstly, it separates the poor and thus poverty from the rest of society, so that poverty appears as a problem of the excluded. Recommendations about getting out of poverty thus remain focused on the poor who can either increase incomes in order to access the mainstream or who can be incorporated through inclusion policies in the institutions which have the potential to

affect them (also Bebbington, this collection). Secondly, in perceiving the poor as institutionally excluded and in focusing on a narrow definition of institutions such approaches perpetuate a perspective on poverty which fails to recognize the significance and complexity of institutions in constituting the variable social relations which generate poverty as an effect. These institutions are not necessarily the formal organizations of state or what development has defined as "civil society."⁶ Critical social institutions in which people are embedded include kinship structures, neighborhood networks, and ethnic alliances, all of which operate at varying levels of informality (although see Cleaver, Bastiaensen *et al.*, 2005, this volume). These institutions transect the imposed boundaries of classification between "state" and "civil society," just as the individuals comprising the formal organizations in either category participate to varying degrees in both. The problem seems to be not so much involvement in institutions *per se* but, rather how "institutions" work, or not, to produce poverty.

The advantage of this perspective is that in viewing the poor as integral to society, even if their position is marginal, it permits the perception of this marginality in social terms. While poverty as an effect remains a problem for those persons who experience it, it can be apprehended as an outcome of the social relations which tolerate, or promote, such effects. Such relations often receive further legitimacy and have their effect deepened and perpetuated as they become inscribed within legal and political systems, thus forcing us to examine the political as well as social aspects of explaining poverty. Poverty from this perspective is partly structural, in relation to the organization of a society in such a way that certain categories or individuals may be situated in positions from where they are unable to derive the same benefits as those occupying favored categories (cf. Bracking, 2003). But as an effect it is also determined by the content of those state and non-state systems of social organization and support, which may or may not regard certain kinds of poverty causing situations as problematic, and hence intervene to prevent or limit the severity and consequences of poverty.

Iliffe's (1987) historical account of the significance of kinship systems in Africa demonstrates how the content of social institutions determined whether or not people faced destitution, as long as they had latent rights to be included within kinship systems. Elsewhere,

destitution was addressed through its institutionalization as a social status in which begging and the right to alms provided certain individuals with a limited but relatively secure means of livelihood. The constitution of destitution as a social status, and a negative one at that, is highlighted in Douglas's (1991) essay on the relation between leprosy and poverty in medieval England. Douglas shows how an increased social concern with leprosy as a contagious disease which necessitated the expulsion of lepers was more a result of social attitudes than a sudden increase in the incidence of the disease. Historical evidence does not reveal any marked increase in mortality in affected areas during this period, as one would expect from a leprosy epidemic (1991, p. 731). The increase in sanctions against lepers, who came predominantly from among the poor, is associated Douglas suggests with a shift in perceptions of tolerance toward the destitute, which lead to the association of ideas about poverty, undesirability, and contagion (1991, p. 733). Similar notions about poverty and destitution live on in attitudes which separate out the deserving from the undeserving poor and which seek to associate the poor with a dangerous moral degradation, as in contemporary United States political mythologies about the "underclass" (Adair, 2002; Goode & Maskovsky, 2001, p. 5).

More recently, Harriss-White (2005, this volume) has shown how destitution in contemporary India cannot be viewed as something outside the bounds of normal society and hence political economy. On the contrary, destitution is central to the political economy of postcolonial India, providing an institutional mechanism through which a proportion of the extremely impoverished may support themselves via the creation of new social networks in largely urban settings. While destitution must be viewed as an economic relationship and as a social institution, and hence in structural terms, Harris-White highlights the problem of agency in effecting poverty outcomes. Those living on the streets as destitute in India's major cities are there not solely because of abstract structures, but because of the consequences of various decisions, which have resulted in the weakening of relationships between themselves and kin. These decisions can reflect the choices of those individuals moving into destitution, as in the example of a group of street dwelling children in Dhaka, who had chosen to break with their family homes, or from the kin from whom they could not realistically expect to find

opportunities for support (Conticini & Hulme, 2004).

If the margins are central to understanding the whole, and destitution can be resituated firmly *within* political economy, the issue of poverty is recast not as social pathology but as a legitimate sociological and political problem. The separation between society and economy is revealed as a distorting representational device. Turnbull could claim that the starving ex-hunting group forced into agriculture in the mountains of Uganda were in effect too poor for "society" (1984, p. xx) because he failed to perceive that as economic relations as relations are *social*, economic and social breakdown are aspects of the same dissolution in the quality and content of relationships.⁷ The question becomes not why are some people poor in society, but why some societies tolerate poverty as an outcome and for whom, and how this toleration becomes embedded within institutional norms and systems. This question has barely begun to be asked, let alone answered. Recent anthropological attempts to theorize this issue through the notion of structural violence (Farmer, 2003) have value but, in laying the blame solely on the negative effects of international policy on local societies, may betray their own investigative promise.⁸

5. MOVING TOWARD A RELATIONAL APPROACH: ENTITLEMENTS AND FREEDOMS?

If, as we have argued here, the key sociological question regarding the persistence of poverty is why some social and political forms have a greater tolerance of poverty outcomes than others the focus shifts away from the immediate causes of poverty effects, and the usual explanatory frameworks concerned with explaining the attributes of poor households at particular points in time, to an emphasis on the social relationships and constructs which reproduce poverty effects. The clearest attempt within mainstream development studies to generate a relational understanding comes from the work of Sen. In his seminal work on famines, Sen (1981, p. 17) explained how famine resulted not from the absence of food—the 1943 Bengal famine occurred when grain was available in rural markets, a finding which has since proved replicable at other times and places (De Waal, 1989)—but because of what Sen (1981, p. 75) calls "exchange entitlements" that allow ac-

cess to food. In the case of rural famines, these entitlements might be the ability to exchange labor for cash with which to purchase food, or other products for cash. Sen's critical contribution here is the insight that poverty is a matter of social relations. Entitlements depend on the specific social and cultural configurations which make them binding. Their erosion or absence results in the exclusion of the person from the "rights" to access them and hence to participate in the economy.

Sen's later work takes these ideas further (1999). Poverty as a state, but really as an effect, is the result of an absence of entitlements reformulated as a broader package of rights, not only to exchange but to health, education, and freedom. Poverty is at its extreme *unfreedom*, a state in which the person lacks rights to health, food and the freedom to achieve the inherent potential in their capabilities, that is to determine their own future (Sen, 1999, p. 53). Variants on this theme have informed the perspective of UN agencies advocating "human development" and of organizations advocating a rights-based approach to development. The philosophical underpinning of this perspective owes much to a specific strand of Western thought which has equated increasing individual freedom with increments in human progress.

However, it is arguably the fact that Sen's vision is so firmly situated within a normative liberal framework that views particular social, political, and economic forms as inherently productive of better effects than others (cf. Sandbrook, 2000, p. 1071), that denies this approach the explanatory power required to understand and tackle poverty that persists in different places. Sen's recent approach is grounded in an abstract universalism which assumes that entitlements and rights are latent across diverse forms of social organization and that notions about rights, depending as they do on quite specific understandings of individual persons as rights bearing agents, have a universal legitimacy. This is problematic. In particular, attempts to explain poverty as a *lack* of something (freedom) detracts from understanding what processes are *present* and actively creating and reproducing poverty (see Bracking, this volume), and thus offers a somewhat placeless and ahistorical account of how poverty is caused in particular contexts. Moreover—and without arguing against the desirability of universal human rights—such interpretations are less able to specify the insti-

tutional mechanisms through which effective rights regimes could be established (cf. Gore, 1993, p. 453). It is not inherently universal, as has been argued in East and Southeast Asia on the grounds that "Asian values" prioritize economic rights and political stability over political and civil rights (Park & Kim, 1998).⁹ If it becomes universal through the establishment of the necessary institutional arrangements to make it so this will reflect the power of international agendas as much as any inherent moral or intellectual claim that such discourses may represent themselves as having (Mohan & Holland, 2001).

6. CHRONIC POVERTY AND THE CAUSES OF POVERTY

This section argues that the concept of chronic poverty is particularly useful as a methodological probe, enabling the identification of the structural conditions which produce ongoing poverty effects, and encouraging researchers to move on from poverty as a state to poverty as a dynamic. The concept of chronic poverty as denoting particular forms of poverty emerged from a critical rethinking of the usefulness of talking about the poor as a general category in both development studies and in the practice of international development. This was a response to three main factors. In terms of poverty reduction policy and performance, it was increasingly clear that even when countries' "performed" exceptionally well, significant minorities of their people remained highly deprived.¹⁰ Empirically, techniques for longitudinal analysis and the availability of panel datasets were becoming more widespread so it was increasingly possible to examine who stayed poor over time (Baulch & Hoddinott, 2000). Conceptually, there was recognition that different kinds of social relations produce poverty effects which differ in duration and intensity.

Thus, analysts could begin to disaggregate between different categories of poor people, be that Iliffe's (1987) distinction between structural and conjunctural poverty, or Hulme and Shepherd's (2003) chronic poor, transitory poor, and nonpoor. The latter authors defined chronic poverty in terms of its duration, in excess of five years. The arbitrary and methodologically driven nature of such a cut-off line has been criticized (Bevan, 2003) and more recently they have defined the chronic poor as

“... people who remain poor for much of their life course, who may ‘pass on’ their poverty to their children, and who may die of easily preventable deaths because of the poverty they experience” (CPRC, 2004, p. 3).¹¹ This is contrasted with the shorter-term periods of poverty that people may suffer as a result of seasonality, a downturn in the business cycle or temporary household level shocks. The concept is explicitly intended to capture that section of society that is generally within poverty¹² and which has very limited prospects of improving its circumstances and becoming nonpoor. An important component of chronic poverty is intergenerational transmission (Harper, Marcus, & Moore, 2003), when poverty status is transferred from parents to children, who are caught in a continuing cycle of deprivation.

Chronic poverty, as a representational device for thinking about poverty, is shackled by many of the problems common to other ways in which poverty is approached in development studies and related disciplines. Firstly, although it recognizes that poverty is experienced by individuals, rather than households, and that intra-household social relations are very important (Hulme & Shepherd, 2003), in empirical work it commonly uses an ideal notion of the household. Secondly, much recent analysis and writing on chronic poverty has remained focused on income or consumption poverty. Thirdly, in presenting some poverty as a chronic condition and an attribute that is transmitted across generations, the concept risks association with the biological metaphors so despised by Fanon (1967) as artefacts of colonial thinking. Finally, its use of the term “cultures of poverty” (CPRC, 2004, pp. 39–40), rings alarm bells for some despite the careful way in which this idea is utilized in chronic poverty research.

If, however, we look beyond these dimensions of chronic poverty to what it actually describes the concept appears more promising. Chronic poverty seeks to identify those within society who have minimal or no prospects for economic and social mobility and are structurally constrained by the social relations which produce poverty effects. Seen in this light the intergenerational transmission of poverty is reframed as an outcome of inequalitarian social relations. Households are used as the unit of analysis not by preference but by necessity, because this is the concept underpinning most of the panel data that is presently available.

Identifying chronic poverty as a particular type of poverty process thus has the potential to reveal where structural causes are significant and intractable (Mitlin, 2003). This is important in encouraging the shift away from simplistic effects oriented analyses of poverty, which identify correlates of poverty and aggregate immediate precipitating factors that push certain households into income poverty, but which fail to address the wider questions around economic and social relationships and the constitution of vulnerabilities. The failures of this approach are evident in the lack of progress in reducing poverty in many countries¹³ and the persistence of poverty in specific regions and social groups.¹⁴

The identification of intractable long-term poverty as an outcome of immanent social relations is, however, only a starting point in beginning to try to understand the factors which produce poverty outcomes. For the concept of chronic poverty to contribute theoretically to the design of a methodology for understanding poverty in different places and across different times, it must move beyond merely identifying a cluster of symptoms. Diagnosis of the causes of poverty, that is, on the specific conjunction of factors which produce poverty effects in different places, depends on combining deep qualitative and historical analysis, to understand the changing nature and context of social and political organizations and institutions, and the changing constitution of the category of poverty itself with quantitative analysis of panel datasets. Simply identifying long lasting poverty effects cannot reveal whether these are the most pertinent characteristics of the experience of poverty for those affected by it, nor can it begin to access the qualitative and subjective dimensions of this experience.¹⁵ The experience of poverty will depend on the extent and ways in which poverty is constructed as a problematic status in various places and times.

The social construction of “poverty” is far from universal, despite donor efforts to promote a universalistic set of poverty attributes, including gender relations, access to rights, and increases in household income. The poor person in rural Tanzania continues to be the person without kin, as much as those for whom material wealth is absent. Close qualitative analysis of poverty effects in such settings reveal not only what the local manifestations of poverty causes are, but also how poverty effects are in fact *created* through social practices. Some of these are extreme, for example, the expulsion of widows through witchcraft allega-

tions, as has occurred since the 1980s in some communities in Western Tanzania (Mesaki, 1994). Less extreme but equally insidious institutional mechanisms that create poverty include arrangements for access to land and livelihoods, extreme examples being the mass exclusion of members of hunting communities from hunting grounds as has occurred in Botswana (Good, 1999), and elsewhere, or the seizure of land from the widows and children of men who have died of AIDS by the male kin of the deceased in East Africa (CPRC, 2004; Ewelukwa, 2002).

These examples of social processes show how the poverty effects they generate are precipitated by institutional factors which affect the access of certain social categories to livelihoods. They also demonstrate how the manipulation of social institutions is not perceived as a problem for those doing the manipulating, for whom the poverty outcomes which affect other people are perceived as necessary, inevitable or the fault of those so affected. Sukuma widows chased away from their communities after being accused of witchcraft are said to be greedy evil doers whose insatiability has resulted in the deaths of innocent victims (Mesaki, 1994). Those San forced to depend on welfare handouts and begging to eke out a subsistence living on the margins of their former lands are condemned as unskilled vagrants who lack the will to farm (Good, 1999). In Bangladesh, community-based and local government social protection is afforded to households that were running well, *shochol*, but hit a major problem such as an injury to the main income earner (Matin & Hulme, 2003, p. 658). In contrast households that have been poor for a long period of time are socially categorized as “hopeless” and so there is no point in providing them with access to social protection schemes (Matin & Hulme, 2003, p. 660).

Kabeer’s (2004) study of changing livelihoods in rural Bangladesh provides the best illustration to date of how the concept of chronic poverty can deepen the understanding of the causes of poverty and poverty reduction. Through a combination of quantitative (panel datasets) and qualitative (life histories) analysis, she identifies the “ladders” that have taken people in Bangladesh out of poverty and the “snakes” that cause slides into poverty that may become “traps.” The ladders include deciding to have smaller families, adopting high-yield varieties of rice, diversifying into horticulture, sending family members to cities or abroad, and educat-

ing children. Many of these opportunities arise from the growth of the local, urban, and global economy, but taking opportunities depends on initial endowments and personal agency. “Snakes,” on the other hand, often take the form of misfortune: ill health, death, business failure, natural disaster, family breakdown (through divorce or abandonment), dowry costs or male “mis-behavior” (gambling, taking drugs and working only intermittently).

The interaction of snakes and ladders explains how some households “escape” poverty while others cannot. But chronic poverty cannot be understood simply in terms of these proximate causes. “[T]he traps that kept poor households poor over an extended period of time, reflected structural, rather than, transitional forms of disadvantage, manifestations of the various forms of power relations that make up Bangladesh society and serve to distort the distribution of resources and opportunities” (Kabeer, 2004, p. 39). In particular, class- and gender-based power inequalities deny the chronically poor access to (i) vulnerability-reducing public services, such as public health, and (ii) market-based services or opportunities, as “markets by their very nature tend to either exclude or exploit those with little power” (Kabeer, 2004, p. 40).

While poverty reduction in Bangladesh since 1990 is based on a number of commonly identified causes—the expansion of the garment industry, agricultural intensification and diversification, family planning, and improved school enrolment (especially for girls)—underpinning such progress were changes in social and political relations, especially the empowerment of women and democratization. Neither of these changes are “ideal,” but many women now have a greater role in decisions within the household and “community” and poor people now have a (highly imperfect) means of expressing their dissatisfaction with their political leaders. Therefore, for those seeking to support poverty reduction in Bangladesh, “. . .the challenge for the future. . .lies in the field of politics as much as in the domain of policy. . .in creating the capacity of poorer and more vulnerable sections of society to influence those that make policies. . .and hold them accountable” (Kabeer, 2004, p. 41).

In each of the cases cited above, the social categorizations find their purchase and means of reproduction within the political sphere. Kabeer’s (2004) analysis reveals how power relations based on class and gender underpin the

processes that trap millions of rural households in poverty. In terms of the San in Botswana, Good has shown how their state of extreme poverty flowed from the ways in which the social norms required to legitimate a particular form of capital accumulation were promoted by a property-owning elite through the dominant political party. As such, the study of poverty cannot be extricated from investigating the political, particularly “the role of elites and the exploitative practices accompanying their ascendancy” (Good, 1999, p. 186). Even where exploitation does not form the main mode of underdevelopment, the attitudes of political elites help inscribe the limits of social responsibility for poverty, perpetuating the representation of poverty as a problem of the poor, and encouraging punitive regimes for the reduction of the risks poverty is seen to carry for the better off. In Bangladesh and Uganda (Hossain, 2005 & Hickey, 2005, this volume), the “economically productive” poor are privileged over the “nonproductive” poor in national political discourse. In India, destitution is criminalized by the state so that destitutes are more a concern for the police than welfare agencies (Harriss-White, 2005, this volume). As the gap between the rich and the poor grows, it becomes easier for elites to assert a conceptual distance between themselves and those living in poverty, whose poverty is blamed on their culture, their ignorance, lack of skills, or their farming practices (Farmer, 1999, p. 148; Woodhouse, 2003).

This tolerance of the effects of poverty provides a justification of sorts for political leaders and political systems for strategies of either omission or limited commission regarding poverty reduction. Toleration of extreme and chronic poverty, indeed acceptance in many countries (particularly in Africa), allows for the practice of a highly limited vision of development and social welfare premised on minimal rather than aspirational living standards for the masses, and a future of poverty alleviation and food aid (Hickey, 2005, this volume). Poverty is accepted as a chronic condition (Wood, 2003). Such fatalism, complacency, or lack of concern must be confronted: nowhere is chronic poverty inevitable. Tackling chronic poverty, however, demands analyses and actions that recognize the centrality of transforming social relations and changing social values. State action has been central to poverty and chronic poverty reduction in South Korea, Malaysia (Bruton, 1992), and Sri Lanka (Sanderatne, 2001). Closer to home, in the north-west of England, where

we are based, state action as much as economic growth eliminated extreme poverty and chronic vulnerability through the establishment of a welfare system ensuring that the jobless could meet their basic needs and pay their rent. This put an end to industrial destitution (Roberts, 1984), and constituted a political statement concerning the unacceptability of poverty that shaped political discourse for decades. The constitution of an effective welfare system was more not a side effect of economic growth or a poverty alleviation or reduction program. It created new social institutions for the prevention of poverty effects through the establishment of state structures with a responsibility to prevent poverty outcomes. At one and the same time, it was a product of changing social relations and a driver that changed social relations.

7. CONCLUSION

The contemporary preoccupation of development thinking and policy on poverty both creates political space to advance the project of poverty reduction and ensures the narrowness of this space though a reductive focus on measurement and poverty correlates. Progress in poverty reduction is constrained by many factors, one of which is the way in which poverty is represented within international development. Frameworks based on the understanding of poverty reduction as linearly increasing household income or consumption through economic growth are unlikely to generate development policies and mobilize public action that can adequately tackle the underlying causes of poverty. Conceptualizing deprivation in terms of chronic poverty, exploring the constraints that close off opportunities for upward social and economic mobility, and analyzing the politically entrenched social relations (household, community, national, and international) that work to produce the effects that constitute the experience of chronic poverty provides a potential means for deepening understanding and guiding action. While work on chronic poverty is only in its initial stages, and the concept faces significant theoretical challenges, it offers a means for moving beyond mere correlates and characteristics of poverty to identifying and examining its underlying causes, which reside in social processes, and become inscribed in economic structures and political norms and institutions.

NOTES

1. In this paper, we do not have the space to explore the political origins and institutional structure of the global “poverty research industry.” However, there are clearly similarities with what has happened in the USA with a focus on measurement and “limited, mostly descriptive explanations” (O’Connor, 2001, p. 21) that do not examine economic and social inequality.
2. This is not to displace economic analysis but to show that the present dominant view of poverty analysis as econometrics supplemented by the “voice” of the poor is insufficient.
3. For a full set of references on these attributes see Chapters 2 and 4 of the *Chronic Poverty Report 2004/2005* (CPRC, 2004).
4. Colleagues in Bangladesh refer to this as the “livestock fattening” approach to poverty reduction.
5. The one exception to this is gender and the assumptions that in all contexts women are subordinate and female headed households are poor. Recent work by Chant (2003) reveals the error of conceptualizing gender relations as being standardized within and between societies.
6. See Mandel (2002) for an account of how “civil society” is being made through international development.
7. “...society itself is not indispensable for man’s survival” but becomes a “luxury” where need reduces people to personal survival (Turnbull, 1984, p. 239).
8. Farmer’s work harks back to Hartmann and Boyce’s (1983) account of “quiet violence” in a Bangladeshi village. Hari, a landless laborer, dies not because he is excluded from society but because of the social and economic relations that have eroded his assets and that deny him access to food and health services (Hartmann & Boyce, 1983, pp. 169–176).
9. At the present time, this is most obvious in China which is lauded by Western governments for its economic growth and income poverty reduction and chastised for its “failures” in terms of human rights.
10. The most obvious example is Uganda in the 1990s. During 1992–99, the aggregate national poverty line fell by 20% but 19% of the population was poor in 1992 and still poor in 1999 and 10% of the population that was nonpoor in 1992 had fallen below the poverty line by 1999 (Lawson, McKay, & Okidi, 2003).
11. Poverty analysis and measurement struggles with the issue of how to deal with the dead. Once someone has died an easily preventable death should they be recorded as an age-specific mortality and removed from poverty analysis? Or, are they continuing to experience the ultimate form of poverty—the loss of all the beings and doings and becomings that they would have lived through over the “stolen” years or decades of their life? Our analysis inclines us toward the second position.
12. The CPRC’s work has emphasized the assessment of poverty in multidimensional terms (Hulme & Shepherd, 2003). This is often feasible in qualitative work but remains uncommon with panel datasets (Baulch & Masset, 2003).
13. In 2003, some 54 countries were poorer than in 1990, in 21 countries, a higher proportion of people were going hungry, and in 14, the child mortality rate had increased (UNDP, 2003, p. 2). In 21 countries, the human development index (HDI) had decreased: until the late 1980s, such reversals were rare as the HDI captures capabilities (literacy, life expectancy) that are not easily lost (UNDP, 2003).
14. In Europe, the most obvious example relates to the Roma, 53% of whom in Hungary are long-term poor. They make up 4–5% of the population but more than one-third of the chronic poor. Vietnam’s progress over the 1990s masked the fact that for its ethnic minorities income poverty remained a norm. For the majority Kinh, headcount poverty dropped from 54% to 31% between 1992–93 and 1997–98. For the minorities, it only dropped from 86% to 75% (Baulch, Chuyen, Haughton, & Haughton, 2002).
15. Shahin (2002) characterizes analyses of statistically representative panel datasets as “lifeless” in contrast to qualitative analyses, often based on life histories, which are “lifelike.” The latter, however, can be challenged in terms of how adequately they represent the experience of a larger number of people. Combinations of high quality quantitative and qualitative work offer the possibility of capturing the strengths of both approaches (Kanbur, 2001).

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