

# POVERTY-FREE FUTURES

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Approximately 10 years ago I was standing with my mother at a food store in Novi Sad, Yugoslavia. We needed to buy yoghurt required by a recipe to finish a dish. It didn't cross our minds that between her, who worked as a senior manager, and myself, employed as an associate lecturer at the university, we wouldn't have enough money to make such a purchase. At that time it was only the cash economy that worked, as personal cheques and credit cards were no longer accepted. The prices of all goods regularly skyrocketed over night as inflation reached the highest ever recorded in history. People were going straight from their workplaces – where everyone received income as banks collapsed – directly to the markets. Delaying your visit to the market by couple of hours would cost half of your salary. Our family friend, gynaecologist and director of maternity hospital, was too busy to go for a couple of days. Eventually, for his half-monthly income, he managed to buy a bar of soap.

The interesting thing is that most people didn't feel as horrible, depressed, or anxious as you would expect. In the situation when we could not afford one yoghurt my mother and I could not help but laugh. Running to the market became some sort of national sport. Women 'competed' to find out exactly how many litres of juice could be made from one orange (I still have a recipe which makes four to five). But at that time we could laugh because we felt that our poverty was temporary. We still had other assets apart from income that we could use. We could still envision a better future. And for some reason we stopped comparing ourselves with 'the West' as we had in previous years of relative affluence (a comparison which would have given us a sense of inadequacy, apprehension and inferiority). We looked around us and concluded that most people were in the same boat and that compared with many others we were still quite fortunate.

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My first thought in coming to Australia was that this country would collapse were it to experience the sorts of the economic sanctions in place in Yugoslavia. At that time, petrol could be found only sporadically but, unlike in Brisbane, people of Novi Sad could walk to most places or ride bicycles. Alternatively, they could easily organise car-pooling. Other strategies included waiting in queues for days

and taking turns to do so, borrowing cars using less gas from family and friends, smuggling petrol over the border and buying on the black market. The joke at the time was that while a Western European earns 3,000, spends 2,500, and saves 500 DEM, the average Yugoslav person earns 30 but spends 3,000 DEM a month. While probably serving to boost everyone's morale this joke as

well as the previous petrol and juice examples help make a few important points.

The first point is how easy it is to move from a situation of relative affluence to a situation of poverty. This has happened to millions of people in Eastern Europe, over a relatively short period of time. For example, using the cost of a basket of basic goods as a measure of poverty, the figures show that child poverty in Russia has now reached 98 per cent (Bradbury & Jantti, 1999). Throughout history, this has happened not only to the members of the middle class like myself but to the members of the financial and social elite as well, and not only in Eastern Europe. Empires fell, the economic system collapsed, wars occurred, family, age and work situation changed, and so on. Because of what I saw in my life and learned from glimpses into history, I believe that no one is safe from finding herself/himself in a situation of poverty. And, if we factor in environmental degradation as an indicator of overall quality of life, we all might already be poor, without even knowing. Therefore, addressing and resolving poverty is everyone's business and should be everyone's priority.

The second point I make in regard to the previous examples is that people who find themselves in situations of poverty use multiple

strategies to alleviate their condition. The poorer they are, the more elaborate and ingenious their strategies for survival are. At the same time, it is often thought that the poor are totally powerless to change their situation and that their only hope is to be passive recipients of aid. Because of this, strategies that today's poor use or have used before to maintain their societies are rarely considered in poverty alleviation measures. In Australia, for example, Aborigines stress the importance of the land as necessary in addressing their current disadvantage. However, the government's reply to Aboriginal poverty is almost entirely through welfare state measures which primarily focus on financial transactions and welfare handouts. This reply is a product of western, materialistic and industrialised society. It fails to recognise the importance of traditional, natural, and cultural assets as well as the importance of spiritual progress and well-being. Another example is the 1994 boycott of products produced by child labour, led mostly by the USA. This resulted in 50,000 Bangladeshi children losing their jobs, and as a result many of them then turned to begging and prostitution (Bjornes, 2001). While the boycott had good intentions, it was one more case 'of Westerners selectively applying universal principles to a situation they did not understand' (Marcus quoted in Bjornes, 2001). It is depressing that more strategies for alleviation of poverty have failed than succeeded. In addition, some have directly contributed to increasing poverty. For example, development policies in the Third World have made many people landless and/or destroyed their environmental assets, as well as their social cohesion and traditional economy. This has not only contributed to the increase in their poverty but also has sometimes been the single biggest factor that created it in the first place. Still, just because poverty alleviation measures have not been successful in the past does not mean that the problem of poverty is such that it cannot be resolved. This, however, requires tapping into the experiences and strategies developed by those who experience poverty on daily basis.

Third, and related to the previous perception that the poor are powerless, is also the conviction that the poor have no future since their predicament will only get worse (Udayakumar, 1995: 339). For example, a 1995 study by the International Food Policy Research Institute concluded that poor

countries suffering from widespread malnutrition and a general lack of food security can look forward to little improvement in the foreseeable future (Gately, 1995). Another study (Hanmer, 2001) concluded that Sub-Saharan Africa would not be able to meet the international development targets halving extreme poverty by 2015 in any likely future scenario. While such forecasting and trend analysis is powerful and might be accurate it does little when it comes to envisioning alternative futures that motivate people to work toward social change.

Fourth, poverty is a complex, multidimensional issue that cannot be understood only in terms of economic indicators, such as GNP or per capita income. Access to other assets such as community support, infrastructure and knowledge base play an equal, if not a more important, role. This is why poverty alleviation strategies in the future need to be based on a reconceptualised understanding of poverty, if they are to be successful. This includes understanding that there are poverties not poverty; that these poverties are processes not states; and that prevention rather than relief is crucial (Walker & Park, 1998: 47).

Fifth, poverty needs to be defined from the perspective of the poor. For example, one study shows that the poor rarely speak of income but rather focus on their ability to manage physical, human, social and environmental assets (Narayan, 2000: 5). This means asking the poor how they define and see their living and working conditions and which areas they believe need to be transformed.

Sixth, poverty is a cumulative process. The longer it goes on the more difficult it is to uproot it. And while the common understanding is that the poor somehow get accustomed to the situation, in fact, the longer poverty goes on the more difficult it is to bear it. People who find themselves temporarily poor might respond to that situation with dignity, humour and resourcefulness. But sooner or later other feelings such as shame, humiliation and despair set in and the opportunities and assets for ingenuity decrease. That the poor do not get accustomed to the situations of poverty can be easily seen from the higher level of poor health and illness among poor as well as from their higher mortality rates. Around 500,000 women die yearly from pregnancy and birth-related complications which are usually related to a lack of

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proper nutrition and adequate health services. Almost 2 million children will die this year because of poverty. And it is estimated that around 30 million people die each year from hunger.

These are only some of the important factors that need to be considered if we are to eradicate poverty. The literature on poverty is huge; including both economy-oriented studies as well as critical and alternative approaches. To summarise what I see to be crucial issues in regard to poverty eradication, I use the Causal Layered Analysis methodological approach, developed by Inayatullah (1998). This approach offers deconstruction, reorders knowledge, and seeks to find the root causes of social diseases (Fricker, 2000). It implies that there are different levels of reality and different ways of knowing. Consequently this requires different levels of analysis and understanding of various realms for implementation of social and individual transformations. Causal Layered Analysis has four levels: the litany, social causes, discourse/worldviews, and myths/metaphor. The litany focuses on quantitative trends and problems which are often exaggerated and used for political purposes. At the level of social causes interpretation is given to the quantitative data. The third level is concerned with structure and the discourse/worldview that supports and legitimates it. At the fourth level, analysis looks for the deep stories, the collective archetypes and subconscious dimension of the issue under inquiry. Causal Layered Analysis does not privilege a particular level but attempts to integrate discourses, ways of knowing and worldviews, as well as to create transformative spaces for the creation of alternative futures (Inayatullah, 1998).

### **Litany**

At the litany level, poverty is measured only through economic and other quantitative indicators. The discourse tends to focus on the overwhelming nature of global poverty; for example, estimates that currently 53% of the world population is classified as poor and that around 3 billion of people live on less than US\$2 a day. The number of people in poverty is represented as a matter of fact and causes are rarely explored. In western media, poverty is usually constructed to be 'out there' among 'the Others', and rarely 'here'. The common results of poverty, such as high fertility rates, low literacy levels, political arrest, organised crime and scarcity of resources are often presented as its main causes. For example, in mainstream discourse on

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poverty there is a huge concern about overpopulation. It is often stressed that world population is expected to increase from 6 billion as it is today to 7.2 billion in 2015 and somewhere between 7.7 and 11.2 billion in year 2050. As 95% of this increase is projected to occur in the countries, which currently have a high proportion of poor, it is implicit that the poor themselves are 'guilty' of creating a future poverty.

At this level, the strategies for alleviation of poverty mostly focus on poverty relief and aid packages. The common response among the affluent is either *apathy* – the problem of poverty is so huge that it cannot be resolved; *helplessness* – I wish there is something I/we could do; or *projected action* – the government, UN or NGOs should do something. Sometimes, magical solutions, such as genetically modified rice and other crops, are also discussed.

### **Social causes**

At the level of social causes analysis, economic, cultural, political and historical factors are discussed. Social causes analysis is most commonly found among policy planners and academics. At this level, processes such as colonisation, modernisation, globalisation, capitalism, urbanisation, as well as national and international governance are discussed. Other indicators of poverty, such as access to education and health care, are included but poverty is still primarily measured through economic indicators, such as GNP and income per capita.

Strategies usually include suggestions on how to increase the economic growth rate or labour productivity, and how to encourage foreign investment. Other suggested strategies include investments in agricultural research, education, health, creation of a welfare safety net, and so on.

### **Worldview/discourse**

At the worldview/discourse level, the main debate is whether the economy needs to be regulated. Libertarians and conservatives argue against any significant interference into the free-market economy, and maintain that poverty can be alleviated only through the free flow of capital and labour. Some also argue that the widening gap between the rich and the poor is 'a natural, necessary and even desirable component and hallmark of the improvement of the human condition'. That is, poverty is the *normal* condition of human society and if the rich were not allowed

to get ever richer the poor would never have any chance to improve their conditions at all. This they could do through ever-increasing access to tools of ever-increasing productivity, through acquiring advanced technology and by 'jumping on the bandwagon' of general development and economic growth that created by entrepreneurs ([www.libertarians.org](http://www.libertarians.org)).

Left-liberals, environmentalists and socialists argue that the global 'casino capitalism' is directly complicit in creating of poverty where previously there was none. They also argue that the unregulated, 'free' economy/market is a myth. They stress that poverty is not created through production

(or the lack of it) but because of the way profits are distributed. They argue that, although global economic activity has grown at nearly 3% each year and doubled in size twice over the past 50 years, the number of people living in absolute poverty has not reduced at the same pace. In regard to the widening gap between rich and poor, they argue that this indeed is a problem because in the future world where 'two-thirds are poor and deprived of basics and promise, there will not be any peace and security' (Udayakumar, 1995: 47). Contrary to a focus on the competitive aspects of human nature, cooperation is seen as the only possible way out. The future is seen as a collaborative enterprise in which the 'well-being of the poor depends on the cooperation of the rich, and the safety of the rich relies on justice for the poor' (Udayakumar, 1995: 347).

Discussions on this level also allow for an analysis of the ways in which the discourses themselves not only mediate issues but also constitute them; or how discourses we use to understand poverty directly influence strategies that are being put in place. For example, if poverty is understood predominantly in terms of economic indicators, only economic measures are going to be suggested. The strategies will therefore not include measures that work against oppressive social structures that are complicit in creation and sustenance of poverty, such as, patriarchy, for example.

### **Myth/metaphor**

At the myth/metaphor level, deeper cultural stories are discussed. For example, the ways western advertisements and other propaganda make

indigenous populations believe their own culture, dress, food, or language are inferior; the ways needs for products and lifestyles produced elsewhere are created (Bjonnes, 2001); or the ways local and global narratives create a situation where some become easy prey for economic exploitation by others.

At this level, we can see how deep beliefs, such as the belief that humans are inherently competitive and selfish, create a worldview that informs discussions that formulate policies and determine actions (or the lack of action). Or we can see how these actions and policies differ from those formed by a worldview that emphasises the role of communication, cooperation, altruism, caring and nurturing as the main themes in human evolution.

At this level we can also investigate deep cultural myths and their relevance for poverty creation and alleviation. For example, in western history two basic narratives about the relationship between men and nature exist (Hollis, 1998). One is the myth of 'The Land of Cockayne', the land

of milk and honey, the 'golden age' where nature provides abundant resources and the magic bowl of porridge never empties. This is the land of unlimited consumption, limitless choices, and ever increasing growth and progress. The current version is consumer-based global capitalism where new wealth and products are constantly being created. This is being done both through technological and economic innovations as well as through the colonisation of nature, lands, peoples, and space.

Another myth is that of Arcadia, where nature is bountiful but humans do not indulge themselves beyond their needs (Hollis, 1998). It is the idea and the image about the harmony between humanity and nature, rather than the image of domination and control of nature by humanity, to produce society and civilisation. In European history, the Land of Cockayne was especially popular during the Medieval Ages amongst lower classes who sought to relieve the drudgery of their everyday lives 'through the pure satisfaction of sensual pleasures' (Hollis, 1998:14). Arcadia, on the other hand, originated in ancient Greece and was revived by Renaissance humanists who were 'seeking to restrain the selfish tendencies of the rich and powerful classes' (Hollis, 1998:14). Its modern versions are today's ecological, New-Age and anti-globalisation movements.

## Conclusion

Poverty is not a necessary evil but the result of how we perceive the world and act within it. Poverty is continuing because the poor are truly silenced; that is, alternatives incorporating local knowledge, experiences, desires and worldviews of the poor are invisible in mainstream discourses. Writing and reading about poverty is a luxury in itself, luxury that is beyond the means of those who are poor.

In addition, official discourse rarely allows for a discussion about the ways in which we, the affluent of the world, are complicit in creating and perpetuating poverty. Or about ways spiritual poverty – ‘a psychological state, generally among the affluent, expressed as a constant hunger for more material things; a sense of alienation, loneliness, and spiritual emptiness’ (Bjonnes, 2001) – are also issues which need to be addressed.

But the worst thing that the mainstream discourse and both the ‘left’ and the ‘right’ worldviews do, is to describe poverty in such terms that it becomes unthinkable to imagine poverty-free futures. Together with the focus on overwhelming nature of current poverty this lack of imagination makes us powerless to act today, one step at the time. But for this to happen, we do not need to travel far and wide nor do we need to carry with us the influence of political power and huge wealth. What we could do is to address destitution among ourselves, listen to those among us who are not allowed to speak and jump on the wagon that is carrying their imagination into the poverty-free futures; the future in which every person will have an easy access to at least one delicious yoghurt a day.

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## FIRST WIFE

Found yesterday, pummelling fence posts  
into winter clay, a cast- iron nail  
lumpy, red, a little rusted, the work  
of unsure hands. This was where  
the smithy stood and grandfather  
struggling with bellows, rose clear  
in our minds though known only  
through legend and artifact.

Just a nail but strange new work  
for a fisherman’s son, shaping steel  
awkward over fire. Dogged, he learnt  
to conjure hoes, scythes, door hinges  
for a great barn, a cottage more grand  
than the slab but where his first wife  
tended the smoking, sulky fire.

She lost in family whisperings

but he, solid as this clumsy nail,  
given time to make sons  
clear scrub, sow and reap, season  
upon season. And spin the tales  
that put a gloss upon his decent life.

But she, a name barely there  
in a graveyard no longer used  
a name hinted at, in the initials  
stitched upon a bridal pillowcase  
folded away by some frugal aunt.

Nicola Knox