The poverty of nations: a relational perspective.

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The poverty of nations: a relational perspective

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1. Poverty

Representations of poverty

Poverty is complex and multi-faceted, a constellation of issues rather than a single problem. Here are a few representations of poverty from around the world.

> 'Many of the world's poorest people are women who must, as the primary family caretakers and producers of food, shoulder the burden of tilling land, grinding grain, carrying water and cooking. This is no easy burden. In Kenya, women can burn up to 85 percent of their daily calorie intake just fetching water.'[1]
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> 'Poverty is a persistent problem for over 20% of the children in the United States. Child development is shaped by children's interactions within and across social contexts. The social contexts in which children from impoverished backgrounds live can be devastatingly harmful: growing up in poverty exposes children to more stress or abuse in the home, neighborhood crime, and school

[1] Team Kenya, 2015, Focusing on girls and women to reduce poverty, https://www.teamkenya.org.uk/2015/08/10/focusongirls/, accessed 11.4.2018

violence. Exposure to environmental conditions associated with poverty profoundly shapes their development, and the effects become more pronounced the longer the exposure to poverty. Empirical studies from multiple social science disciplines ... have consistently documented crippling disadvantages across a number of developmental domains, showing that the disadvantages associated with poverty are entrenched, wide-reaching, and constitute an immediate and pressing policy challenge.'[2]

'In our world, one in eight people live in slums. In total, around a billion people live in slum conditions today. ... The impact of living in these areas is life threatening. Slums are marginalised, large agglomerations of dilapidated housing often located in the most hazardous urban land – e.g. riverbanks; sandy and degraded soils, near industries and dump sites, in swamps, flood-prone zones and steep slopes – disengaged from broader urban systems and from the formal supply of basic infrastructure and services, including public space and green areas. Slum dwellers experience constant discrimination and disadvantage, lack of recognition by governance frameworks, limited access to land and property, tenure insecurity and the threat of eviction, precarious livelihoods, high exposure to disease and violence and, due to slums' location, high vulnerability to the adverse impacts of climate change and natural disasters.'[3]

'Poverty is both a cause and a consequence of poor health. Poverty increases the chances of poor health. Poor health in turn traps communities in poverty. Infectious and neglected tropical diseases kill and weaken millions of the poorest and most vulnerable people each year. ... Very poor and vulnerable people may have to make harsh choices – knowingly putting their health at risk because they cannot see their children go hungry, for example. ... The cost of doctors' fees, a course of drugs and transport to reach a health centre can be devastating, both for an individual and their relatives who need to care for them or help them reach and pay for treatment. In the worst cases, the burden of illness may mean that families sell their property, take children out of school to earn a living or even start begging. ... Overcrowded and poor living conditions can contribute to the spread of airborne diseases such as tuberculosis and respiratory infections such as pneumonia. ... A lack of food, clean water and sanitation can also be fatal.'[4]

'The United Kingdom, the world's fifth largest economy, is a leading centre of global finance, boasts a "fundamentally strong" economy and currently enjoys record low levels of unemployment. But despite such prosperity, one fifth of its population (14 million people) live in poverty. Four million of those are more than 50 per cent below the poverty line and 1.5 million experienced destitution in 2017, unable to afford basic essentials. … Official denials notwithstanding, it is obvious to anyone who opens their eyes. There has been a shocking increase in the number of food banks and major increases in homelessness and rough

[2] A McCarty, 2016, Child poverty in the United States, Sociology Compass 10(7) 623-639.
[3] UN Habitat, 2016, Slum almanac 2015-2016, Nairobi: UN-Habitat, pp 2, 4.
[4] Health Poverty Action, n.d., Key facts: Poverty and poor health, http://www.healthpovertyaction.org/policy-and-resources/the-cycle-of-poverty-and-poor-health/the-cycle-of-poverty-and-poor-health1/, accessed 11.4.2018

sleeping; a growing number of homeless families …have been dispatched to live in accommodation far from their schools, jobs and community networks; life expectancy is falling for certain groups; and the legal aid system has been decimated, thus shutting out large numbers of low-income persons from the once-proud justice system.'[5]

'Poverty remains firmly entrenched in rural areas, which are home to 84 per cent of Ugandans. About 27 per cent of all rural people – some 8 million men, women and children – still live below the national rural poverty line. Uganda's poorest people include hundreds of thousands of smallholder farmers living in remote areas scattered throughout the country. Remoteness makes people poor ... In remote rural areas, smallholder farmers do not have access to the vehicles and roads they need to transport their produce, and market linkages are weak or non-existent. These farmers lack inputs and technology to help them increase their production and reduce pests and disease. They also lack access to financial services, which would enable them to boost their incomes – both by improving and expanding their production, and by establishing small enterprises. The poorest areas of the country are in the north, where poverty incidence is consistently above 40 per cent and exceeds 60 per cent in many districts – and where outbreaks of civil strife have disrupted farmers' lives and agricultural production. ... Changing climate patterns ... have a serious impact upon water and other natural resources, agricultural production and rural livelihoods.'[6]

'Poverty causes families to send children to work, often in hazardous and low-wage jobs, such as brick-chipping, construction and waste-picking. Children are paid less than adults, with many working up to twelve hours a day. Full-time work frequently prevents children from attending school, contributing to drop-out rates. According to the Labour Law of Bangladesh 2006, the minimum legal age for employment is 14. However, as 93 per cent of child labourers work in the informal sector – in small factories and workshops, on the street, in home-based businesses and domestic employment – the enforcement of labour laws is virtually impossible.'[7]

The first thing that springs out from such examples is their diversity. There are some common themes here - deprivation, lack of resources, the way that problems in one part of life generate problems in others – but we need to avoid the assumption that it all boils down to one thing, or that everything shares a common cause. Poverty is not a single condition. It has been understood in different ways at different times. It is multi-headed; for every problem that is reduced or resolved, another one seems to take its place. It occurs in many different ways, often at the same time. It often happens that

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[5] United Nations Human Rights Council, 2019, Visit to the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland: Report of the Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights, A /HRC/41/39/Add.1 pp3-4.
[6] International Fund for Agricultural Development, n.d., Rural Poverty in Uganda, https://operations.ifad.org/web/ifad/operations/country/project/tags/uganda
[7] UNICEF Bangladesh, n.d., Child labor, http://www.unicef.org/bangladesh/children_4863.htm, accessed 11.4.2018

when people talk about poverty, they are not talking about the same thing. Some people talk about lack of rights, others about dependency; some are concerned with low income, others with long-term problems; for some, participation in society is central, and for others it is whether people own things.

Definitions

There are more concepts of poverty than it is possible to discuss in this book, but in previous work I have argued that it is possible to see several clusters of meaning - 'families' of interrelated concepts.[8] Some concepts of poverty relate to *material conditions*:

- A generally low standard of living, where poverty becomes a struggle to manage in everyday life. The World Bank has described poverty as 'the inability to attain a minimal standard of living'.[9]
- The lack of specific goods and items, such as housing, fuel, or food. For Vic George, this depended on 'a core of basic necessities as well as a list of other necessities that change over time and place.'[10]
- A pattern or 'web' of deprivation, where people have multiple deprivations, or they may be frequently deprived, though there may be considerable fluctuations in circumstances.[11]

Some concepts of poverty are based in *economic circumstances*:

- A lack of resources. For Townsend, people were poor not only because they lacked the conditions that others have, but 'If they lack or are denied the incomes, or more exactly the resources, including income and assets or goods or services in kind to obtain access to these conditions of life'.[12]
- An 'economic distance' from the rest of the population, or a degree of inequality, which means that people are unable to buy the resources that others can buy.[13]
- Economic class - an economic status, or relationship to production and the labour market, which means that people are consistently likely to be disadvantaged or deprived. Ralph Miliband wrote: 'The basic fact is that the poor

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[8] P Spicker, 2007, Definitions of poverty: twelve clusters of meaning, in P Spicker, S Alvarez Leguizamon, D Gordon (ed) Poverty: an international glossary, London: Zed Books.
[9] World Bank, 1990, World Development Report 1990: Poverty, World Bank, Washington DC, p.26
[10] V George, 1988, Wealth, poverty and starvation, Hemel Hempstead: Wheatsheaf Books, p 208
[11] D Narayan, R Chambers, M Shah, P Petesch, 2000, Voices of the poor: Crying out for Change, World Bank/Oxford University Press, ch 11.
[12] P Townsend, 1979, Poverty in the United Kingdom, Harmondsworth: Penguin, p 36.
[13] M O'Higgins, S Jenkins, 1990, Poverty in the EC: 1975, 1980, 1985, in R Teekens, B van Praag (eds) R Teekens, B van Praag (eds) Analysing poverty in the European Community, (Eurostat News Special Edition 1-1990), Luxembourg: European Communities.

are an integral part of the working class - its poorest and most disadvantaged stratum. .... Poverty is a class thing, closely linked to a general situation of class inequality'.[14]

Then there are *social relationships*:

- Poverty understood as dependency on financial support and state benefits;[15]
- Poverty as a social class – a set of inferior social roles and statuses, exemplified in the idea of the 'underclass'.[16]
- The problem of exclusion, which implies not simply that poor people are rejected, but that they are not part of the networks of social solidarity and support than most people in a society rely on.[17]
- A 'lack of basic security', 'the absence of one of more factors that enable individuals and families to assume basic responsibilities and to enjoy fundamental rights'.[18]
- A lack of entitlement, in the sense that poor people do not have the rights to access and use resources that others can. The concept is linked, by Sen or Nussbaum, to a lack of capabilities.[19]

It is difficult to separate many, if not most, of the ideas, from the final category: the position of poverty as a moral evaluation. Poverty refers to severe hardship or a situation that is morally unacceptable. The moral content of poverty implies not simply that poverty is approved or disapproved of, but that the simple fact of accepting the term also carries a moral imperative - a sense that something must be done. That might be countered by denying that people are poor, or finding some other moral reason for rejecting the claim for support, but neither of those positions shakes the fact that a moral claim is being made.

It is not really possible to offer an authoritative 'definition' of poverty, and it makes little sense to impose a single, uniform interpretation, because that would exclude many of the issues which matter. There is an overlap between the concepts, but that reflects the complex, varied nature of the phenomena that are being considered. Figure 1.1 shows, schematically, the main clusters.

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[14] R Miliband, 1974, Politics and poverty, in D Wedderburn (ed) Poverty, inequality and class structure, Cambridge: CUP, pp 184-185.

[15] G Simmel, 1908, The poor, in Social Problems 1965 13 pp 118-139.

[16] See L Morris, 1994, Dangerous classes: the underclass and social citizenship, London: Routledge.

[17] S Paugam, 1993, La disqualification sociale: essai sur la nouvelle pauvreté, Paris : Presses Universitaires de France.

[18] J Wresinski, 1987, Grande pauvreté et précarité économique et sociale, Journal officiel de la république française 6 fev. 1987

[19] A Sen, 1981, Poverty and Famines: an essay on entitlement and deprivation, Oxford: Clarendon Press, Oxford: Clarendon Press; M Nussbaum, 2006, Poverty and human functioning: capabilities as fundamental entitlements, in D Grusky, R Kanbur (eds.), Poverty and Inequality, Stanford: Stanford University Press.

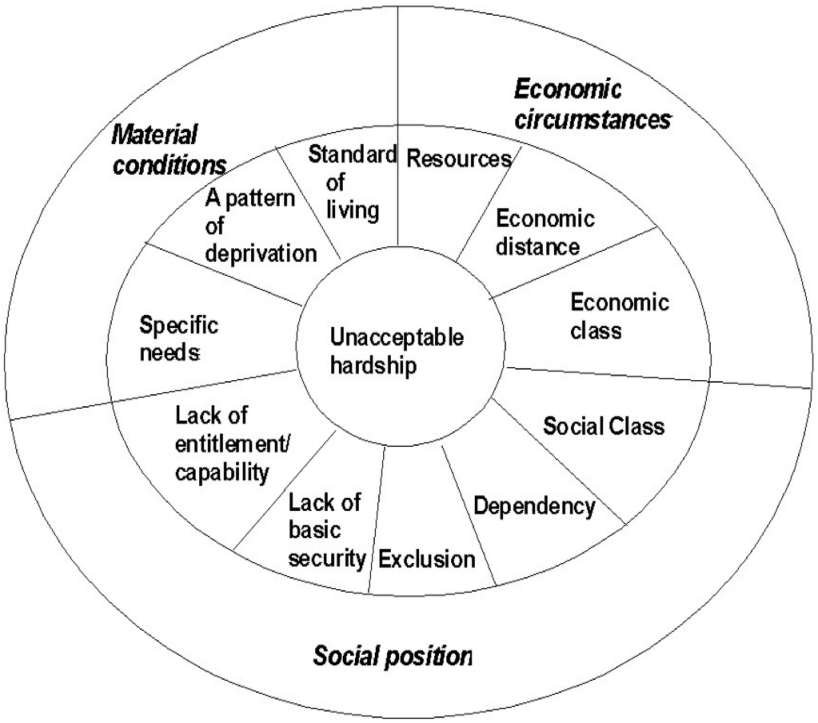

Figure 1.1: **Poverty: Twelve clusters of meaning**

Some clusters of meaning are close to each other, and they can be difficult to untangle in practice; each of the clusters is close to its neighbours, and there is an evident relationship between needs and a pattern of deprivation, or economic and social class. As we move round the circle, however, the distance between the clusters becomes clearer and stronger. Dependency or exclusion are not at all the same as a lack of resources; economic and social class are not evidence of lack of entitlement. Although poverty is not a single, unified idea, several of these issues can apply at the same time. Poverty refers to material deprivation, economic circumstances or social circumstances; it refers to hardship; and its use entails a judgment, that the situations it refers to are normatively serious.

Many of the advocates of a 'scientific' discourse about poverty think that it is possible to say things much more exactly, to command general agreement about meanings and definitions, and to agree policies internationally on that basis. This is from a declaration signed, a little over twenty years ago, by Peter Townsend and more than seventy of the leading researchers in the field:

> 'EUROPEAN SOCIAL SCIENTISTS are critical of the unwillingness at international level to introduce a cross-country and therefore more scientific operational definition of poverty. In recent years, a variety of different definitions have been reviewed and evaluated. They apply only to countries or groups of countries.

> Many are conceptually unclear: some confuse cause and effect. ... Poverty is primarily an income- or resource-driven concept. It is more than having a relatively low income.... If criteria independent of income can be further developed and agreed, measures of the severity and extent of the phenomenon of poverty can be properly grounded. That will lead to better investigation of cause and more reliable choice of priorities in policy. SCIENTIFIC PROGRESS can be made if material deprivation is also distinguished from both social deprivation and social exclusion. ... All countries should introduce international measures of these basic concepts and take immediate steps to improve the accepted meanings, measurement and explanation of poverty, paving the way for more effective policies.'[20]

If we can all agree that poverty has a clear, set meaning, the Declaration supposes, it should be possible to identify its relationship to other social problems, and to respond appropriately.

There are three powerful objections to this approach. The first is philosophical. The meaning of a word depends on how that word is actually used, not on the definition that some people wish to impose upon it. Insisting that poverty is about material deprivation, and about nothing else, does violence to the way the word is actually used. It should be clear even from the opening quotations that poverty is not adequately defined by any specific forms of deprivation, and that it extends far beyond income and resources. Patterns of deprivation, such as low income, asset deprivation or standard of living, may be useful indicators of poverty, but they are not the whole story.

The second objection is scientific. The reason why so many social scientists are determined to impose a firm definition on the term is rooted in the belief that firm definitions are basic to measurement and analysis. Concepts have to be 'operationalised', or translated into terms which lend themselves to empirical analysis. This aim is made explicit in the Declaration, when it claims that an agreement about definitions will make it possible for 'measures' to be 'properly grounded'. There are two kinds of error being made here. One is to assume that the things which are conventionally measured and analysed are the things we need to focus on. The central focus on income in poverty studies is a notorious example of the 'streetlight effect': looking for answers in the place where the light is shining, instead of the place where the object in question might be found. Robert Chambers complains:

> 'poverty is then not what people living in poverty experience. Nor does it reflect the expression of their priorities. Poverty is economic, to do with reported income or consumption. … Those who plough this furrow dig themselves into a reductionist rut. Wider and more complex realities disappear out of sight and out of mind. … Poverty becomes what has been measured.'[21]

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[20] P Townsend and others, 1997, An International Approach to the Measurement and Explanation of Poverty: Statement by European social scientists, in D Gordon, P Townsend, 2000, Breadline Europe, Bristol: Policy Press.

[21] R Chambers, 2007, Poverty research: methods, mindsets and methodologies, Brighton: University of Sussex Institute of Development Studies, p 18.

The other mistake is to assume that using empirical data depends on 'measuring' complex phenomena; it does not. Empirical analysis in social science mainly works, not by precise specification of an issue, but by 'triangulation' - accumulating evidence that corroborates and tallies with other evidence. Quantitative data are useful, not decisive; no single 'metric' can stand on its own. The figures provide social scientists, not with measures, and not with unassailable 'facts', but with indicators – pointers, signposts and guides to interpretation.

The third objection is ethical. Poverty researchers need to respect the views, experience and voice of people who are poor. An interpretation of poverty that imposes a single, authoritative definition does not square with what people say, and the assumption that this is possible or desirable is not consistent with an empowering ethical approach.

What, then, do poor people say about poverty? A good starting point is *Voices of the Poor*[22], a set of studies by the World Bank. The studies were based on participative poverty assessments – on a process of engaging and listening to poor people. It reports the feelings and concerns of poor people in their own words. They conducted meetings and interviews with groups of people; more than 20,000 subjects participated in 23 countries. The second volume, *Crying out for Change*, identifies a series of major themes. Some of the themes are concerned with material deprivation; they include a concern with precarious livelihoods, problems of physical health and living in excluded locations. Other themes put great emphasis on social relationships - relationships of gender, social exclusion and lack of security. And then there are political issues - limited communal organisations and abuse of power. They describe a 'web' of poverty – a tissue of interconnected issues that affect people in poverty in different ways.[23]

Some people do strongly emphasise the role of resources, but that is not universally the case. Poor people do not see the experience of poverty as being solely, or even mainly, a matter of managing resources. Take, for example, access to water, one of several issues raised at the start of this discussion. There are powerful statements in *Voices* about water: 'Water is life, and because we have no water, life is miserable.'[24] Despite that, access to water does not feature enough in the responses to be presented as a major theme in its own right. It gets three pages of Volume Two, and half of that is about irrigation - that is, the general problem of getting enough water to support agriculture. So what is going on? One possible answer might be that problems which outsiders might suppose are pre-eminent are not necessarily the problems that people most clearly identify. Collecting water, for many, is a part of daily life; there is no more point in complaining about it than there is about having to cook. Halleröd suggests:

> 'the longer a difficult economic situation lasts, the more people adjust their aspirations. Hence, it would seem that people adapt their preferences in relation to their economic circumstances.'[25]

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[22] D Narayan, R Chambers, M Shah, P Petesch, 2000, Voices of the poor, vols 1-3, World Bank/Oxford University Press.

[23] D Narayan, R Chambers, M Shah, P Petesch, 2000, Voices of the poor: Crying out for change, World Bank/Oxford University Press.

[24] D Narayan, R Chambers, M Shah, P Petesch, 2000, Voices of the poor: From Many Lands, World Bank/Oxford University Press, p 37

[25] B Halleröd, 2006, Sour grapes: relative deprivation, adaptive preferences and the measurement of poverty, Journal of Social Policy 35(3) 371-390 pp 377-8

However, when poor people are asked more specifically about deprivations they experience, they don't adapt their preferences to their situation - they interpret it in terms of the expectations of their society. Research in Benin found that the items poor people identified as essential were the same items identified by other non-poor people in that society; the researchers see that as a direct contradiction of Halleröd's contention.[26]

All this is concerned with the priorities people don't have. The other side of the question concerns the priorities that they actually do have. The point is not that water is not important, but that other things appear to be even more important. One of the key methods developed to establish which resources are most essential to people has been the 'consensual' approach, which asks the general public what is essential, and then establishes which things poor people cannot afford. The places where consensual accounts of poverty have been made, such as Britain,[27] Australia[28], Finland and Sweden,[29] yield some similarities among the wealthiest countries; and it is difficult to make a comparison with, say, the study in Vietnam, which rated having a buffalo or cow as being much more essential than a bathroom.[30] This could be interpreted simply as an example of a difference in norms or standards, but I think it is showing us something else - something that goes beyond either resources or social values. The differences reflect the social, political and economic organisation of different countries. The reason why the consensual surveys of poverty in countries like the UK and Australia yield such similar results is not that the UK and Australia have just the same resources, but that they have very similar forms of social organization. Vietnam is different, not primarily because its norms or values are different, but because its social organisation is different. The buffalo is the clue.

There are many other examples of how different patterns of social organisation shape poverty. The reason why the expenses of health care make people poor in the United States is not that United States has low levels of health care resource; it is because they have a social organisation of health care that leaves people without the basic levels of support that they will find in most other developed countries. (Being able to get a doctor to visit the sick was ranked as the most essential factor in Vietnam, too.) In Mali, Malawi and Tanzania. the deprivations that children experience are different again:

> 'Mali, for example, defined Child Labour as a separate dimension (29% deprived), reflecting a national priority, while Tanzania and Malawi opted to include it in a broader dimension of child protection (10% and 66% deprived, respectively), which includes also early marriage (in both countries) and child registration (in Tanzania). For the same reason Malawi included a separate dimension of food security for children from 5 to 13 years old.'[31]

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[26] S Nandy, M Pamati, 2015, Applying the consensual method of estimating poverty in a low income African setting, Social Indicators Research 124(3): 693–726.
[27] J Mack, S Lansley, 2015, Breadline Britain, London: Oneworld
[28] P Saunders, 2011, Down and out: poverty and exclusion in Australia, Bristol: Policy Press.
[29] B Halleröd, D Larsson, D Gordon, V Ritakaillio, 2006, Relative deprivation: a comparative analysis of Britain, Finland and Sweden, Journal of European Social Policy 16(4)328-345, p333..
[30] R Davies, W Smith, 1998, The basic necessities survey, Hanoi: Action Aid.
[31] L Ferrone, 2017, Do the Seven Kingdoms of Westeros need seven measures of child

Child labour, early marriage and child registration are, of course, a matter of social organisation; only food security is clearly about resources. When poor people are asked to explain what poverty means to them, they talk about social relationships far more than they talk about material deprivation. People in poverty consistently point to problems in their society – problems such as isolation, lack of power, gender relationships, or mistreatment by people in authority.

Poverty, the *International Declaration* grandly states, 'is primarily an income- or resource-driven concept.'[32] It is easy enough to suppose that people who take a different view from social scientists ought to adjust their thinking. That can only work by leaving out consideration of issues that matter to people profoundly. Poverty is a subject that raises passions; people care very much about the subject. Telling them that they have misunderstood their own situation will make some people angry, but for others it will only confirm how powerless they are. Hardly anything that gets discussed under the banner of poverty does not really matter, even if at times attention tends to get diverted towards myths and stereotypes rather than the major problems. The things that people do complain about – the aspects of their hardship that are unacceptable - are more typically the things they expect to be different, such as being unwell, being exposed to violence, or being persecuted by people in authority. And those are things that poor people in richer countries complain of too.

Relative poverty

One of the standard distinctions made in textbooks twenty or thirty years ago was a distinction between 'absolute' and 'relative' poverty - there are still some throwbacks in contemporary work. Absolute poverty was supposed to relate to basic needs. The OECD defined it as 'a level of minimum need, below which people are regarded as poor, for the purpose of social and government concern, and which does not change over time.'[33] This is closely tied to an idea of poverty as basic subsistence. People had physiological needs, for example for a basic calorific intake each day, and if they were not able to afford that, they could be counted as poor. Because those needs were part of the makeup of human beings, they could be considered to be constant over time. That was never a satisfactory way of describing subsistence. The levels of minimum need are not fixed; any focus on 'basic needs' has to be stretched to take into account the social and economic conditions where poverty is experienced.[34] And even the most basic needs that people have - such as food, clothing and shelter - cannot be considered wholly in isolation from the society they lived in. So, in the 1970s, the idea of absolute poverty was moderated through a concept of basic needs. Basic needs extended beyond minimum subsistence:

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deprivation? https://blogs.unicef.org/evidence-for-action/do-the-seven-kingdoms-of-westeros-need-seven-measures-of-child-deprivation/

[32] Townsend et al, 1997.

[33] OECD, 1976, Public Expenditure on Income Maintenance Programmes, OECD, Paris, p 69

[34] D Ghai, A Khan, E Lee, and T Alfthan, 1976, The Basic Needs approach to development, Geneva: ILO.

> 'Firstly, they include certain minimum requirements of a family for private consumption: adequate food, shelter and clothing, as well as certain household furniture and equipment. Second, they include essential services provided by and for the community at large, such as safe drinking water, sanitation, public transport and health, education and cultural facilities.' ...[35]

In the Copenhagen Declaration, absolute poverty was described as 'a condition characterised by severe deprivation of basic human needs, including food, safe drinking water, sanitation facilities, health, shelter, education and information.'[36]

The idea of relative poverty was developed mainly as a critique of these approaches. It might have meant at least three quite distinct positions, rather too often assumed to be equivalent to each other. In the first place, relative poverty might be taken to mean that the tests for poverty are based in social norms and expectations, and are liable to change. Absolute poverty was supposed to describe a fixed, constant state of being; the idea of relative poverty, by contrast, supposes that the tests might need to adjust to those conditions, and that as some needs were met, others would become apparent. Poverty is a moving target. This is the way that Martin Ravallion uses the idea of relative poverty: so, in his view, there is absolute poverty in the poorest places, and relative poverty, defined to a less restrictive standard, in developed economies.[37]

A second view of relative poverty was that the nature of poverty should be considered to reflect the standards of the society where it applied. Poverty is defined socially, because the rules that govern people's behaviour depend on understandings and arrangements that differ between societies. Richer societies are able to demand and impose higher minimum standards for food, consumer goods, sanitation, public safety and so on. Critically important issues like access to land, shelter, education and employment are socially defined. This is not just about expectations; limiting the range of acceptable conduct determines what is possible in a particular place. People are homeless, not just because there are no homes, but because the rules governing access and entitlement are defined socially. For example, in many societies, people with nowhere to live can squat. In much of the developed world, that is not an option, and people have to live on the street instead. Amartya Sen's understanding of capabilities and commodities recognises these issues. The idea of a capability represents, in abstract terms, the things that people need to do - to have food, the capacity to move around, communications, and so forth. Commodities represent the specific means by which these capabilities can be recognised, but the commodities through which capabilities like 'shelter' or 'communication' are realised are different in different societies.[38] Peter Townsend explained relative deprivation in these terms:

> 'People are relatively deprived if they cannot obtain, at all or sufficiently the conditions of life - that is, the diets, amenities, standards and services which allow them to play the roles, participate in the relationships and follow the customary

[35] International Labour Office, 1976, Employment Growth and Basic Needs: a One World Problem, Geneva: ILO, p 243

[36] United Nations, 1995, Report of the World Summit for Social Development, (Copenhagen Declaration) p 41, http://daccess-ods.un.org/TMP/684172.958135605.html.

[37] M Ravallion, 2016, The economics of poverty, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

[38] A Sen, 1999, Commodities and capabilities, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

behaviour which is expected of them by virtue of their membership of society.'[39]

The question of what makes poverty depends on the way that entitlements, amenities and services are shaped by the standards of each society. Townsend argued for a 'thoroughgoing relativity'.[40] He emphasised the relationship of poverty to social norms - the expectations, patterns of behaviour and customs that are accepted 'in the societies to which they belong'.[41] That implies, in turn, that the experience and character of poverty will be different in different societies.

A third view of relative poverty is that it describes a form of inequality. Poverty, Townsend insisted, is not inequality;[42] but in the statement, I have just cited, he identifies poverty explicitly in terms of disadvantage, and that is just another way of saying that it is unequal. The idea of 'economic distance', referred to earlier, is an example of the same kind of reasoning. It is generally expressed as a percentage of median household income, usually 50% or 60%; that is a test of dispersion, not of adequacy. The rationale is not that poverty is being precisely measured, but that at certain levels of income people are so far removed from the mainstream pattern of life that they can be considered to be poor. The test of economic distance directly reflects income inequality within a particular society.

There are three different kinds of relativist argument here, and there is a good case for all of them; standards are not fixed, they are socially constructed, and unavoidably they do reflect issues of inequality. The absolutist position has not been able to stand against any of the three, and that is why it is far less often referred to than it was twenty five years ago. If poverty is relative, it has to be understood within the context of the society where it takes place. There are some intellectual problems with that, and I will return to those issues in due course. For the present, however, I am more concerned with the way that concepts of poverty shape our understanding of the experience of poor people, and the idea that poverty is 'relative' in any of these senses does not go far enough.

Absolute and relative poverty begin from a common position. They both describe poverty as a situation, a set of circumstances or a state of being – a position that can be considered exclusively from the perspective of the individual who experiences it. If, for example, a person has less money than a poverty threshold, does not have access to specific facilities or amenities, or lacks key resources, that person might be considered to be poor, both on relative and absolute definitions. There are reasons to think this kind of representation of poverty is misleading, and that is the subject of the next section.

Poverty as a relational concept

Conventional economic theory treats individuals as if they lived on desert islands, in isolation from other people: ' a collection of Robinson Crusoes, as it were.'[43] The Copenhagen definition of absolute poverty begins with an innocuous word: poverty is a

[39] P Townsend, 1979, Poverty in the United Kingdom, Harmondsworth: Penguin, p 36.
[40] Townsend, 1979, p 33.
[41] Townsend, 1979, p 31.
[42] Townsend, 1979, p 57.
[43] M Friedman, 1962, Capitalism and freedom, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, p 13

'condition', a property of the poor person. When the primary issue in world poverty was subsistence agriculture, this might have made some sense, because the condition of subsistence farmers is remarkably self-contained: the resources, assets and income derived can usually be described in terms of unique households. It is not coincidental that the strongest adherents of the absolute model of poverty have been those who worked in the poorest countries, such as Lipton and Ravallion.[44] However, most countries have moved away from that kind of world. Poverty in contemporary societies is defined and experience in terms of the way that people live in relation to other people.

There are some concepts of poverty - the web of deprivation, a low standard of living, and a lack of resources - which are based in the situation that poor people find themselves; they might in principle be applied to people living in isolation from society. However, most of the definitions of poverty considered so far in this chapter are relational, not situational: they are concerned not with material conditions, or the things that people have or do not have, but with relationships between poor people and others. The word 'relational' sounds a bit like 'relative', which is liable to confuse, but they have different implications. Relative poverty, while it might mean several things, is essentially poverty that is relative to the society where it occurs. That might well be something like the level of income, the things that someone owns, the capabilities of the poor person. People might be considered 'relatively' poor if, for example, they do not have a bed for every child or a warm overcoat.[45] On this account, the idea of poverty is much like the idea of ill-health: it is a condition or a state of being, which can be considered individually, person by person.

'Relational' concepts call for a different way of thinking about the issues. They are based in relationships with other people. Poverty is not so much like ill health – a condition or situation that the person has - as it is like ideas of social class, status or power; a complex set of circumstances, defined in terms of that person's relationships to other people. Other, simpler, examples of relational concepts might refer, for example, to being part of a family, employment status, or membership of a club; they do not mean anything at all unless other people are included in the idea. If poverty is unusual in this, it is not because it is relational – lots of other concepts are - but because it is so complex. It manifests itself in many different ways. It is not consistent over time – people can be poor at some times and not at others. People may not recognise themselves as being in relationships of poverty; sometimes they just do not want to think of themselves as being poor. Despite that, poverty is just as real, and just as important, as being a member of a class, a family or an ethnic group.

It is easiest to show what the relational aspects of poverty might be by example. *Voices of the Poor* identifies a long series of relational issues – power, gender and social organisation among them.[46] Table 1.1 re-presents material used by the researchers to describe the 'web' of poverty;[47] it was initially drawn up in a rather attractive diagram, but apparently that was deemed too cluttered to use.

Some of the factors in the table are self-evidently relational, and I have listed them in the middle column. They include issues like debt, corruption, gender relations, legal issues, political organisation, and much more. Some others are not evidently relational. (There are

[44] M Lipton, M Ravallion, 1995, Poverty and policy, ch 41 of J Behrman, T Srinivasan, Handbook of development economics, vol 3B, Amsterdam: Elsevier.
[45] See e.g. J Mack, S Lansley, 2015, Breadline Britain, London: Oneworld.
[46] Narayan et al, 2000.
[47] R Chambers, 2007, Poverty research: methods, mindsets and methodologies, Brighton: University of Sussex Institute of Development Studies, p 37.

nevertheless some very strong arguments to say that issues like disability, old age, pollution, sickness and hunger should be thought of as relational nevertheless. Sen reviews relational accounts of hunger as part of his discussion of social exclusion.[48]) The key point to take away is a simple one: the issues in the table that are clearly and directly relational outnumber the rest by more than two to one.

[48] A Sen, 2000, Social exclusion: concept, application and scrutiny, Manila: Asian Development Bank, pp 9-12.

Table 1.1: The web of poverty

Class of issues	*Relational issues*	*Issues that are not self-evidently relational*
Problems with institutions and access	Problems with documents Rude behaviour Extortion Corruption Poor service	
Poverty of time	Low earnings Family care/domestic dependents	Distances Travelling and waiting Time-laborious activities
Seasonal dimensions	Work Debt	Sickness Hunger
Place of the poor	Isolation Lack of infrastructure/services	Bad shelter Unhealthy Exposed Polluted
Insecurities	Work/livelihood Crime Civil disorder War Legal Macro-economic	Natural disasters
Physical ill-being	Appearance	Hunger/lack of food, Sickness Exhaustion Disabled/old Lack of strength
Social relations	Widowhood Gender roles Individualism Lack of cohesion	
Material poverties	Lack of work Low returns Taxation Casual work Debt Dowry social code Lack of access	Lack of assets Lack of resources
Ascribed and legal inferiority	Gender Ethnicity Caste Refugees and displaced persons Children	
Lack of political clout	Behaviour of elites Lack of political organisation	
Lack of information	Weak networks	Physical isolation No TV, radio, newspaper
Lack of education	Poor quality Need children at home Cost	Distance

Several writers in recent years have been feeling their way towards a relational understanding of poverty, often linked to the idea of exclusion. Others refer to the

relational dimensions of the subject obliquely; that is only to be expected, because any empirical research is likely to encounter some of the relational issues. The writers who have come closest to a relational understanding of the subject are Amartya Sen and Ruth Lister, though both in their own ways stop a little way short of declaring that poverty is relational. Sen attributes the relational elements of poverty to the concept of social exclusion. He holds that the concept of 'capability deprivation' or poverty has always incorporated relational elements; he has welcomed the idea of exclusion as a way of emphasising the importance of those issues. 'Some types of social exclusion must be seen as constitutive components of the idea of poverty - indeed must be counted among its core components.'[49] He distinguishes two types of process: exclusions which are 'instrumental', which can be seen as causes of poverty, and exclusions which are 'intrinsic' or 'constitutive' elements of deprivation. For example,

> 'The relational exclusions associated directly with unemployment can have constitutive importance through the connection of unemployment with social alienation, but they can also have instrumental significance because of the effects that unemployment may cause in leading to deprivations of other kinds.'[50]

Lister, for her part, accepts the principle that poverty can be defined in terms of material deprivation, but she argues for a relational perspective as a further component:

> 'The material - lack of the material resources needed to meet minimum needs, including social participation ... - is widely regarded by social scientists as the stuff of how we define poverty. But when we also conceptualise poverty in relational and symbolic terms, it changes the angle of vision to provide a more acute sociological and social psychological understanding.'[51]

While material deprivation remains, in her view, at the heart of the concept of poverty, she classifies some aspects of poverty as 'relational-symbolic'. This includes such issues as disrespect, humiliation, stigma, the denial of rights and lack of voice. These are issues which, she has argued, should be considered as having 'parity and interdependence' with the material aspects of the term.[52] In her earlier work on the concept of poverty, she suggested that poverty was 'mediated and interpreted' through such relationships.[53] In the later paper, she has edged towards a stronger relational focus, re-emphasising the role of relational issues, both social and psychological, as important elements of poverty in their own right.[54] In many circumstances 'poverty' refers immediately and directly to social relationships. Stigma, exclusion, entitlement and lack of security are not just *mediated*

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[49] A Sen, 2000, Social exclusion: concept, application and scrutiny, Manila: Asian Development Bank, p 5.
[50] Sen, 2000, p 22.
[51] R Lister, 2015, To count for nothing: poverty beyond the statistics, Journal of the British Academy, 3 139-165, p 140.
[52] R Lister, 2004, Poverty, Cambridge: Polity Press, p 8.
[53] Lister, 2004, p 8.
[54] Lister, 2015, p 141.

through relationships; they *are* relationships.

Resources and relationships

If the experience of poverty is substantially a question of social relationships, it seems appropriate to question how that can be reconciled with the kinds of definition I have been discussing. Some of the clusters of meaning considered earlier are explicitly and directly concerned with social relationships: class (whether economic or social), dependency and exclusion. Some are statuses, that is, sets of social roles and norms - lack of entitlement and lack of basic security. As a moral evaluation, the idea of poverty implies social obligations, rights and responsibilities. In sum, seven of the twelve clusters of meaning identified earlier in this chapter are clearly and directly relational.

Even if many concepts of poverty have relational dimensions, it could still be argued that this is not typical of the way that poverty is most widely understood – that poverty is primarily framed, regardless, in terms of a lack of goods or resources. 'There is general agreement', David Gordon claims, 'that poverty can be defined as having "an insufficient command over resources through time."'[55] This is probably a fair representation of the mainstream view in social policy, but it bears re-examination. In five of the twelve clusters of meaning I have outlined, poverty is primarily understood in terms of access to resources. They are:

- the lack of specific goods and items
- the web of deprivation
- a low standard of living
- a lack of resources, and
- economic distance. (This is a comparative lack of resources, but by the same token it is relative rather than relational.)

The relational elements of these concepts may not be immediately obvious, but they are there nevertheless. An insufficient command over resources might refer, not just to access to physical items, but to a range of relationships - services, facilities or participation in society. People's command of basic items such as housing, education, health care, transport and personal security is developed through a tissue of interwoven social and economic relationships. Often, despite an initial emphasis on resources, these concepts point at the same time to a set of economic and social relationships. Ideas such as the web of deprivation, patterns and standards of living, or economic distance are all ways of trying to capture a wider, broader sense of poverty.

The links between resources and relationships go all the way through. Money may seem to be an unlikely example, but money too has relational dimensions. One of the most basic ideas in economics is the idea that the price of goods and services depends on demand as well as supply. Demand is defined in terms of the willingness of different participants to devote their financial resources to obtaining different

[55] D Gordon, 2006, The concept and measurement of poverty, in C Pantazis, D Gordon, R Levitas, Poverty and social exclusion in Britain, Bristol: Policy Press, p 32.

commodities. Describing poverty in terms of a fixed level of income, such as $1.90 a day, seems to suggest that money is a fixed good with an inherent value. Money is not a fixed good; its value is relative. Even the cost of money itself varies:

> 'In Indian villages, power relations over many generations have solidified conditions of contrived scarcity, generating a rent-based distribution system in which the weaker sections cannot escape. Being a comparatively efficient medium of exchange, money is the most important scarce commodity. It thus has a high price, and those who possess it can exploit those who do not.'[56]

What anyone's money is able to buy depends on the money that other people have. Wherever commodities are scarce, people with more money are able to obtain them before people with less. When 'targeted' programmes give money to some people and not others, it affects the balance of resources; this has an effect on what people who get the benefits are able to buy; that in turn affects the price of certain goods. A study in the Philippines for the World Bank found that, when some families with children got benefits, the price of protein-rich foods increased, and the nutrition of other children – the ones who did not get the benefits - got worse.[57]

Command over resources and the ability to obtain commodities are based in transactions, and transactions are relational. The fundamental question, Sen argues, is whether or not people are entitled to obtain the commodities that are there.[58] Entitlement cannot be understood in isolation. The web of deprivation, economic distance and a low standard of living call for consideration of relative purchasing power, while command over resources, the lack of resources and lack of specific goods are as much about entitlements as they are about the goods. It is hardly possible to do that without considering rights, relative purchasing power, access or basic security.

It follows that *all* the different ways of understanding poverty identified in this chapter, without exception, depend on statements about social and economic relationships. They may not be exclusively relational, but they all have relational elements, and the relational issues are not secondary to understanding the experience of poverty - they are integral to it. Social relationships are not just a reason for poverty - they are the stuff of poverty, what poverty is made of. Poverty is not just a relative concept; it is a relational one.

A relational perspective does not exclude consideration of material issues, but it does change the way that such issues need to be thought about. Social scientists have been likely to assume that the core of poverty is reducible to the question of resources, while other issues such as exclusion or insecurity are by-products; but that distinction, even if it is convenient for analysis, is arbitrary. It would make better sense – and it is arguably more faithful to the tenor of the mainstream argument - to say that poverty is both resource-based and dependent on social relationships. There are some issues associated with poverty which are not relational, such as clean water or sanitation; and some are relative without being relational, such as impaired health or early death. Resource-based

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[56] S Davala, R Jhabvala, S Kappor Mehta, G Standing, 2015, Basic Income: a transformative policy for India, London: Bloomsbury p 48

[57] D Filmer, J Friedman, E Kandpal, J Onishi, 2018, General equilibrium effects of targeted cash transfers, Washington DC: World Bank Group.

[58] Sen, 1981.

concepts of poverty are not exclusively relational, then, and resource-based arguments that focus on those issues are still important in their own right. However, any focus on purely material issues is incomplete: well-being depends on an interaction between the person, the material circumstances and the social. Sarah White argues:

> 'Subjective, material and relational dimensions of wellbeing are revealed as co-constitutive. Wellbeing is emergent, the outcome of accommodation and interaction that happens in and over time through the dynamic interplay of personal, societal and environmental structures and processes.'[59]

If we follow through the implications of this argument, the suggestion that resources are the fundamental issue, and that everything else is a consequence, is unsustainable. Poverty is not 'primarily an income- or resource-driven concept' that can be 'distinguished from social deprivation and social exclusion'.[60] It is a set of social relationships that manifest themselves in terms of deprivation, disadvantage, impaired economic relationships, lack of entitlements and social exclusion. There are many points in this book that refer to problems of resources or material deprivation, because those are some of the key ways in which relationships of poverty are expressed. Resources, however, cannot be considered in isolation from the social relationships. Leaving out the relational elements, as too many descriptions of poverty try to do, strips resources and goods of their meaning - of their place in people's lives.

[59] S White, 2017. Relational wellbeing: re-centring the politics of happiness, policy and the self, Policy and Politics, 45(2) 121–36, p 133.
[60] Townsend and others, 1997.