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**DRIVERS AND MAINTAINERS
OF POVERTY IN KENYA: A
RESEARCH AGENDA**

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ONE

INTRODUCTION

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Introduction

Poverty reduction has remained the core objective of international development as evidenced by regular commitments to actualize it. Locally, poverty has been on the development agenda since independence. In both cases, reducing poverty, let alone eliminating it, has proved an elusive development objective, as evidenced by the extent to which the world is off target in achieving most of the millennium development goals, in particular the goal of reducing by half the number of people living in extreme poverty by 2015. In Kenya, it is now quite obvious that the country will not achieve this goal, and hence the need for continued research and discussion on poverty, as one way of keeping poverty issues on the development agenda. It is in this context that the chapters in this publication should be viewed; they are meant to raise the profile of the poverty debate in Kenya and hopefully outside the country as well.

Normally, each of the chapters would start with a discussion on poverty as a general social phenomenon but, to avoid the eventual repetitions, this chapter offers a general background for all the chapters. The first part of the chapter covers conceptual issues while the second part looks at specific issues covered in each of the subsequent chapters.

Definitions and Conceptualisations of Poverty

There are many definitions of poverty. Not surprisingly, a consensus has yet to emerge on what it entails to be poor. The definitions differ on what constitutes poverty and the portfolio of poverty attributes; and whether poverty is to be predicated on individuals, households, or communities. Earlier definitions of poverty focused on income as its defining characteristic. In line with this definition, poverty is to be predicated on an individual. The logic and rationale behind this approach to defining poverty is that, in principle, an individual above the monetary poverty line is thought to possess the potential purchasing power to access the goods and services needed to function at a sufficiently comfortable level of well-being. However, it is widely recognised that when it comes to thinking of ways to tackle poverty, a focus on income is not always helpful because some (non-monetary) public goods cannot be purchased as their markets do not exist. Furthermore, for attributes that can be purchased, markets, especially in developing countries, operate very imperfectly. Therefore, income as a sole indicator of poverty is limited, as it does not (or cannot) incorporate and reflect such key dimensions of poverty as life expectancy (longevity), literacy, the provision of public goods, and even at the limit, freedom and security.

The limitations of using income-based definitions of poverty have led to a redefinition of poverty in order to focus on both individuals and households, more specifically on their consumption expenditure (Thorbecke, 2004; Lok-Dessallien, n.d). Individuals and households are poor if consumption falls below a certain threshold, usually defined as a minimum, socially acceptable level of well being by a population group. Thus, a household is considered to be poor if its members cannot afford, for example, some recommended food energy intake, plus a minimum allowance for non-food consumption. Accordingly, a poverty line is derived from the consumption of food and non-food items to distinguish the non-poor from the poor. Arguably, the consumption approach is closely related to the income approach even though it offers a broader conception of poverty. For this and other reasons, more socially based conceptualisations of poverty have emerged, the main ones being: the basic needs approach, the asset based approach, the social exclusion approach, the human capability approach, and the rights approach.

The basic needs definition of poverty attempts to address some of the limitations of the income-based definition by distinguishing between private income, publicly provided services, and different forms of non-monetary income. Thus, the approach defines poverty as the deprivation of values, mainly material, for meeting basic human needs. This definition of poverty embraces lack of access to such necessities as food, shelter, schooling, health services, portable water, and sanitation facilities, employment opportunities, and opportunities for community participation. The definition is, therefore, a social definition of poverty in that it invites us to look beyond purely economic factors to a broader appreciation of poverty that requires different sets of indicators to describe it. The basic needs definition is in line with the approach of the UN's Summit on Social Development in 1995, which defined poverty as: lack of income and productive resources to ensure sustainable livelihoods; hunger and malnutrition; ill health; limited, or lack of access to education and other basic services; increased morbidity and mortality from illness; homelessness and inadequate housing; unsafe environments; and social discrimination and exclusion. Poverty is also characterised by lack of participation in decision-making in civil and social life (UN, 1995). It is evident that, though the basic needs definition is social in nature, it, at the same time, allows poverty analysis to be predicated on the individual.

According to the asset-based approach, poverty is best understood as a household-based phenomenon, rather than as a phenomenon predicated on individuals. Thus, the poor are households which have low asset bases and with low asset productivity. Households trapped in poverty are vulnerable, and their response to shocks can lead to lower quantities of assets (Siegel and Alwang, 1999). Household assets refer to the stock of wealth used to generate well-being and can either be tangible or intangible. Tangible assets include assets such as land, labour, capital and savings (that is, natural, human, physical, and financial assets), while intangible assets include: social capital; proximity to markets; health and education facilities; and empowerment (that is, social, location, infrastructure, and political institutional assets). Poverty is, therefore, the absence of both tangible and intangible assets primarily at the household level.

The social exclusion approach is based on social categories and their power relations, rather than on individuals and households (de Haan, 1999). The approach is, therefore, heavily informed by political sociology. The main argument of the approach is rather obvious. It is that people as social categories do not possess equal assets in terms of power, education, language, property, and social networks. Because of this differential asset ownership, some people/groups are in a dominant position and, therefore, in a position to include or exclude other groups through favours or exploitation. As such, the poor face certain structural barriers in terms of access to education, employment, information, social services, land and political “voice” (de Haan, 1999). According to this approach, the poor are people who are excluded from access to resources, opportunities, information and connections through having limited access to opportunities, uncompetitive markets, and poor information flow, among other processes. This includes the unemployed and low-income groups, such as the working poor and unskilled casual workers (Amis, 2003).

The human capability approach invites us to look at human beings either as individuals or as groups, and ask the questions: are they functioning at a minimally acceptable level within the society? Are they able to live with dignity? If the answer to these questions is “no”, then such human beings are poor. The approach, therefore, emphasises people’s abilities and opportunities to enjoy long, healthy lives characterised by ability to participate freely in society (Sen, 1993). Expectedly, the approach encompasses a wide range of features relating to poverty, such as hunger, poor education, discrimination, vulnerability, and social exclusion, which yield rather straightforward poverty indicators, such as life expectancy, literacy rates, and malnutrition. However, others, such as participation, are not so straightforward, especially with regard to quantification. In addition, what is acceptable to function with dignity tends to be determined by norms which can vary widely, from one society to another and from one setting to another. For these and other reasons, the human capability approach can be viewed as a somewhat philosophical approach, as it touches on the highly philosophical issue of human dignity.

The human rights approach looks at poverty from both an individual and a group perspective, but even more critically, with legal lenses. Accordingly, the poor would be defined as those who are least capable of achieving or defending rights such as rights to a decent standard of living, food or other rights that others take for granted. These include: civil and political rights (e.g. freedom of speech, religion, political affiliation, and assembly), and economic, social, and cultural rights (e.g. rights to essential healthcare, education, shelter, land, and livelihood). The approach accepts the classical liberal argument that rights are universal: they apply equally to everyone, are indivisible, and are equally important. Thus, no right, or set of rights, takes precedence over another.

The rights perspective sees poverty as being both a cause and a product of human rights violations. Therefore, the approach asserts a causal link between political marginality, for example, and poverty. In this way, it overlaps with the social

exclusion approach, in that it seeks to strengthen the claims/rights of the most vulnerable, such as women, children, and ethnic/racial minorities to the social, political, and economic resources that all should enjoy. It is, therefore, concerned with individual and group entitlements to basic services and livelihoods. This means that, for example, healthcare is to be regarded as a right, rather than being granted on the basis of need. By emphasizing rights rather than needs, the approach seeks to differentiate itself from the needs approach in general, and the basic needs approach in particular. Needs are, therefore, entitlements that individuals or groups can demand, principally from the state. Analyzing why citizens are unable to claim their rights and ensure accountability by public institutions is, therefore, central to this approach.

The definitions and conceptualisations of poverty will continue to differ depending on many factors such as the points of view of those studying poverty and those of the poor people being studied. Racelis (2003), for example, points out that non-poor people's definition of poverty tends to focus on factors such as: (i) lack of income, as seen in the US \$ 1.00 per person per day measure, or the basket of goods approach that estimates the cost of items required to provide an individual with at least a certain threshold of calories per day; (ii) social psychology of the poor, such as attribution of apathy, hopelessness, and anomie; (iii) social exclusion of the poor, as in concepts of vulnerability, marginality, and deprivation; and (iv) political powerlessness, such as dependency, limited participation, and lack of control over one's future (Racelis, 2003).

In contrast, when asked to define poverty, the poor tend to focus on factors such as: (i) absence of physical well-being that defines a poor person as someone who is sickly, handicapped, too weak to find work, or is completely dependent on the charity of others; (ii) lack of material assets such as land, property, household equipment and furniture, and money; (iii) insecurity and vulnerability to dangers such as crime, violence, and natural or human-made calamities and disasters; (iv) lack of social support from family members, friends, neighbours, the community, and the state; and (v) lack of efficacy, as in the sense of powerlessness in dealing with the political elite or the government (Laquian, 1968; Racelis, 2003). Thus, the definition of poverty is dependent on many factors, with 'who is defining poverty' as one of the factors.

Regardless of the "scientific" conception of poverty, it is now generally accepted that poverty everywhere involves people experiencing very real material and other deprivations. Thus, the concept is used to cover a wide-ranging set of "denied values", with each society attaching different weights to such values. This makes poverty relative. One manifestation of the relativity is that people's perception of poverty tends to change as countries get richer: in this sense, the definition of poverty will always depend on what people in a particular society, at a particular point in time, perceive as poor (McKay, 2001). In the Kenyan case, this could easily translate into what each local community perceives poverty to be.

Regardless of its relativity, the common denominator in the conceptions of poverty seems to be that it is a state of denied values that is multi-dimensional, with the dimensions including material deprivation, powerlessness, helplessness, vulnerability to natural, economic, and social shocks, and isolation from the larger society and other socioeconomic infrastructure. It cannot, therefore, be reduced to any one particular dimension such as income, education, health, or social exclusion. Still, accepting that poverty is relative in the social sense invites the challenge of whether it is also so in the methodological sense and, even more important, whether the relativity is to be seen in the context of its conceptual opposite: absolute poverty.

Relative and Absolute Poverty

According to its relative conception, poverty is socially defined and dependent on social context. However, a distinct concept of relative poverty exists on its own. Relative poverty is a condition indicated by severe deprivation of basic needs, including food, safe drinking water, sanitation facilities, health, shelter, education, and information. Factors considered by the UN's Human Poverty Index (HPI) include child malnutrition, early death, poor healthcare, illiteracy, and poor access to safe water and sanitation. A relative measurement would be to compare the total wealth of the poorest one-third of the population with the total wealth of the richest one per cent of the population (UNDP, 1997). The relatively poor are those whose income or consumption level is below a particular fraction of the national average. Relative poverty, therefore, encourages an analytical focus on income inequality trends (Streeten, 1994).

Adoption of a multi-dimensional understanding of poverty introduces further possibilities for relativity. For example, the amount of education needed to avoid falling into poverty is likely to increase over time, other things being equal. Exposure to more varied or more industrial risks is likely to require increased health expenditure to maintain the same level of health. Thus if the 'social wage' does not increase correspondingly, similar levels of real private disposable income would mask an increase in poverty (or literally ill-being).

Relative poverty contrasts with absolute poverty. People in absolute poverty live below an economic poverty line. This is the level of income below which one cannot afford to purchase all that is required to live. Absolute poverty is defined in terms of the requirements considered adequate to satisfy basic needs. The absolute poor have no means to meet the minimum needs. Those falling below the poverty lines derived in this manner live dehumanising lives according to the universal norms of human dignity: facing starvation, lack of shelter, or the prospect of turning to immoral activities for survival (Kenya, 2007). There is a sub-category amongst the absolute poor which includes those people who cannot afford the minimum food requirements even if they allocate all their spending on food and these are referred to as the *hardcore poor*. The World Bank's adoption of a multi-dimensional understanding of poverty compounds the relationship between relative and absolute poverty even though in doing so, it is simply being more realistic. The Bank sets the absolute poverty line at one US Dollar per day for the least developed countries (mostly

African countries), and 2 US Dollars per day for the middle income countries, which is essentially an argument for the relativity of poverty, but this time using absolute measures. Furthermore, as Sen (1993) argues, relative deprivation in terms of incomes can yield absolute deprivation in terms of capabilities, depending on a person's ability to convert income into well-being, which, in turn, is based on, for example, health status, age, gender, and differences in social or ecological status. The point then is that, it is not always easy to separate relative and absolute poverty conceptually and empirically.

Chronic, Transitory, and Severe Poverty

Chronic poverty is understood as poverty that persists over a long period of time, which may be several years, a generation or several generations (Hulme and Shepherd, 2003). In the work of the Chronic Poverty Research Centre, it refers to poverty of long duration, the poverty of those who are poor for most of their lives and 'transmit their poverty' to subsequent generations; to the situation of those caught in poverty traps and to those who number among the 'hard-to-reach poor': those least likely to experience the benefits of development initiatives and, presumably, growth (CPRC, 2004; Du Toit, 2005).

The chronically poor experience deprivation for many years, often during their entire lives, and sometimes pass on poverty on to their children. Many people in this category die prematurely from health problems that are easily preventable. For them, poverty is about deprivation in many dimensions: hunger and under-nutrition, dirty drinking water, illiteracy, a lack of access to health services, social isolation and exploitation, as well as low income and assets.

The chronically poor have distinct characteristics such as lack of assets and a high dependency ratio that may account for their persistent poverty. The chronically poor include the *always poor*, those whose poverty score in each period of chronic poverty measurement is below a defined poverty line; and the *usually poor*, whose mean poverty score over all periods is less than the poverty line, but who are not poor in every period.

By contrast, the transient poor are those that have difficulty insuring themselves against the consequences of shock such as adverse weather changes (McKay and Lawson, 2002). The transient poor move into and out of poverty over time, depending on factors such as the state of the harvest, prices or opportunities for wage labour. They include the *fluctuating poor*, those who are poor in some periods but not in others, and have a mean poverty score around the poverty line and the *occasionally poor*, those who have experienced at least one period in poverty; although their mean poverty score is above the poverty line (CPRC, 2004:5).

While there are some overlaps between the *severely poor* and various chronic poor groups, not all chronic poor households are severely poor. 'Poverty severity' refers to the extent of the shortfall below the poverty line; it is a static concept, capturing the

fact that those below the poverty line are not equally poor: some people are slightly below the poverty line, while others are far below it. 'Poverty chronicity' on the other hand captures the fact that some of the poor are poor for a short period of time (the transitory poor) while others are poor for long periods (the chronically poor). Poverty chronicity is, therefore, a longitudinal concept, referring to persistence in poverty (Yaqub 2003, cited in CPRC, 2004). It has been generally assumed that people who are *severely poor* are least likely to escape poverty, and that the *extremely poor* are normally those who have been in poverty for a long time.

Poverty in Kenya

The various constructs of poverty summarised above are, of course, just that: theoretical constructions. Even when theoretical common sense dictates that poverty be perceived as a multi-faceted social phenomenon, applying this view still remains a major challenge, perhaps because the view compounds an already complicated matter. The complexity of conceptualizing poverty at the policy level is reflected in Kenya's attempts to define poverty since independence. At independence in 1963, poverty was conceptualised in absolute terms, with income as the defining indicator of degrees of poverty. By mid 1970s, however, poverty was beginning to be viewed not only in terms of disparities in incomes, but also in terms of lack of redistributive measures (Kenya, 1974). This forced the government to shift the policy from wages and subsidies to issues of access to essential services and basic needs, such as education, health, food, housing, and water. Thus, poverty was, for the first time, seen as including non-income dimensions. This conception of poverty informed the 1974 Kenya Welfare Monitoring Survey and the subsequent policy documents, such as the 1999 Kenya Participatory Poverty Assessment report, the 2001 Participatory Poverty Assessment report, and the 2001 Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (PRSP).

The complexity of conceptualising poverty, and consequently the causes of it, is reflected in the papers contained in this volume. Taken together, the authors demonstrate the view that there is no one way of explaining poverty as a concrete historical phenomenon. The chapters make several arguments, all of which, additively, begin to sketch a picture of poverty in Kenya, and its explanations. In reading the chapters, what will strike the reader are the echoes from the theoretical literature sketched above. The chapters suggest that the issue of what constitutes poverty in Kenya is yet to be conceptualised in a fully coherent manner, in spite of the existence of the theoretical literature cited above, and the efforts by the government to go beyond the incomes criteria. In other words, the literature is yet to fully find its way into poverty research in the country and into policy documents. This means we are yet to fully explain the high incidence of poverty in Kenya, though we have pretty good ideas on the matter. Is poverty due to policy and institutional failures, social factors, cultural factors, etc.? Furthermore, assuming we know the causes of the widespread poverty, what can be done to provide escape routes from the poverty traps?

Chapter two shows that we now have sufficient data in Kenya to allow us to begin analysing poverty in the country. We now know that poverty is both urban and rural, that it is widespread, and that there are major regional and local differences in the way

poverty is “distributed”. Chapters three and four offer social explanations of poverty in Kenya. They argue that socio-cultural processes can help us explain the high levels of poverty in Kenya. These include changes in the institution of the family, from the extended family to the nuclear family; existence of a patriarchal society; stratification of society through formal education and monetization of the economy; a high rate of urbanisation that has outstripped rates of economic growth; socially constructed ideologies such as the “fallacy of hard work” as the only escape route from poverty; cultural practices and prejudices, for example, on gender roles, etc.

Chapter five looks at poverty as a function of the economic processes in the country. It argues that there is a historical link between macro-economic policies and economic well-being at the household level. Although the link is not causative, still some of the economic growth enhancing policies may have increased inequalities by denying economic growth benefits to the poorest. Furthermore, the deteriorating terms of trade, globalisation, natural shocks such as rain failure, inflation, and fiscal policies have all contributed substantially to exposing more and more people to poverty-introducing risks, in the specific Kenyan context, where few mitigation policies and institutions exist.

Chapters six and seven draw their inspiration from a combination of the social exclusion, human capabilities, and rights approaches to poverty as they focus our attention on the political and institutional environment as another explanation of poverty in Kenya. The chapters argue that though poverty eradication has been on Kenya’s development agenda since the very early days of independence in 1963, high levels of poverty still persist. This is because the formal institutions that have been in place since 1963 were not designed to address the poverty problem, but rather to sustain the social status quo inherited from colonialism. This is also true of formal policies at the political and administrative levels. Furthermore, there has, at times, been a mismatch between well-intentioned policies and the structure of the institutions intended to implement the policies. The overall results have been as follows: a tendency to blame the victims, dominance of unhelpful peasant-based politics with little notion of citizen entitlements, poor management of the productive resources such as land etc. In other words, there has been little political will to fight poverty. Hence, the interrupters of, and escape routes from poverty have barely been activated. Thus poverty persists.

Somewhat controversially, chapter eight makes the relativist argument that ethnic attitudes towards “being poor” might have something to do with why some ethnic groups tend to escape poverty, while others tend to stay in it. Using the tool of ethnolinguistic analysis, the author explores the questions: what makes poverty unique in some communities; and what keeps the poor going in different communities in Kenya? The author posits the hypothesis that some communities have a tendency to resign themselves to poverty, while others have the opposite tendency to want to fight their way out of poverty. The former tendency is characterised by fear of risk taking, while the latter is characterised by risk taking.

Chapters nine and ten offer a welcome methodological and conceptual footnote to the effect that studying poverty need not be a monopoly of the social sciences. In this case, the argument is that those in literature and the media, and, by extension, other non-social science disciplines have a great deal to contribute towards our understanding of poverty, especially its characteristics. Both the literature and the media have borrowed from nearly all the theoretical approaches to poverty to come up with a rich eclectic concept of poverty.

Mainstream and peripheral literature has for centuries interested themselves in the poverty condition and Kenya is no exception, as demonstrated in chapter nine. The literature portrays poverty as a concept encompassing lack of income, social exclusion, dispossession by society, subsistence livelihoods, loneliness and helplessness, being at the mercy of nature, poor housing and nutrition, etc. The literature also fully appreciates that there are different categories of poverty, including the “not so poor”, the “poor” and the “very poor”.

Like literature, the media have clear conceptions of poverty and its manifestations. The media portray the poor as those who: have little or no resources; live in poor dwellings, for example in slums; belong to vulnerable social categories such as orphaned children, widows, or female headed households, the elderly, those suffering from chronic illnesses such as HIV/AIDS, etc; are excluded by society and thus denied services, property, food, clothing, love, housing, education, health services, etc.

All in all, the papers in this volume seem to agree, albeit at a general level, on what observationally constitutes poverty and, therefore, who the poor are in Kenya. However, they offer different explanations for the existence of poverty in Kenya, depending on their academic disciplines and orientations. Even then, they converge on the view that poverty is a complex social phenomenon that demands a multi- and an interdisciplinary approach, if we are to fully understand it; which we must do before embarking on studying chronic poverty in Kenya.