



**Chronic Poverty**  
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## Very poor, for a long time, in many ways...

Defining 'the poorest' for policymakers

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### What is Chronic Poverty?

The distinguishing feature of chronic poverty is extended duration in absolute poverty.

Therefore, chronically poor people always, or usually, live below a poverty line, which is normally defined in terms of a money indicator (e.g. consumption, income, etc.), but could also be defined in terms of wider or subjective aspects of deprivation.

This is different from the transitorily poor, who move in and out of poverty, or only occasionally fall below the poverty line.



## Abstract

This paper introduces the ways in which *the poorest* are defined, conceptualised and counted, and attempts to identify the characteristics that make such poverty intractable in the face of policy. We apply the concepts of absolute and relative poverty, as well as those of poverty depth, breadth and duration, to explore where to draw a line between the 'merely poor' and the poorest. We suggest that the poorest tend to be those who face, or have faced, multiple challenges in different spheres of life, and outline the causes of poverty that is absolutely or relatively severe, multidimensional and/or persistent. The paper concludes with a brief discussion of why development policy should be concerned with the poorest at all.

**Keywords:** poverty depth; poverty breadth; poverty duration; methodology; policy

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## 1 Introduction

Goal One of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) – which, alongside poverty reduction strategies (PRSs), currently dominate international development policy – commits governments and international organisations to reducing global extreme poverty by half over the next decade. While the Goal's use of the US\$1/day measure to define extreme poverty has undoubtedly provided an important rallying call in the battle against poverty, analysts increasingly recognise that inherent methodological problems undermine the usefulness of the US\$1/day line as a way of determining the global distribution of poverty, much less as a means of identifying poor households and individuals and the causes of their poverty.<sup>1</sup>

Policymakers have thus been increasingly forced to focus more closely on identifying *the poorest*. The poorest are those 'on the bottom of the heap' – this much is clear. But where – practically and ethically – should policymakers 'draw the line' between the 'merely poor' (Conway *et al.*, 2004) and the poorest? In a context where poverty lines are recognised as methodologically highly problematic and an arbitrary division of 'the poor' from 'the non-poor', while at the same time crucial for analysis and policymaking, building consensus around a definition of an *extreme poverty* line is an exercise even more fraught with difficulties.

This paper introduces the ways in which *the poorest* are defined, conceptualised and measured.<sup>2</sup> We apply the concepts of absolute and relative poverty, as well as those of poverty depth, breadth and duration, to explore where to draw the line identifying the poorest. We note that the poorest often inhabit particular geographical spaces (from countries to communities), and are often members of one or more marginalised social groups. We then outline the causes of severe, multidimensional and/or persistent poverty, suggesting that the poorest tend to be those who face, or have faced, multiple difficulties in various spheres of life. The paper concludes with a brief discussion of why development policy should be concerned with the poorest at all.

## 2 Who are the poorest?

By definition, all poor people fall below a poverty line, whether defined by income, consumption or a broader bundle of monetary, non-monetary and subjectively determined

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<sup>1</sup> For an excellent review of these arguments, as well as a rebuttal, see UNDP IPC (2004a).

<sup>2</sup> Producing a paper that seeks to summarise the state of knowledge about the poorest is a task that we have approached with caution and humility. On one hand, the very nature of the marginality experienced by the poorest means that research and statistics on them as a group are rare. On the other, the poorest are highly heterogeneous, and there are relatively large literatures that focus on specific groups among the poorest. In this paper, we have had to simplify complex issues and empirical debates, and limit the space allocated to many issues that are of great importance to specific groups among the poorest.



assets. But not all poor people are poor in the same *dimensions* (poverty *breadth*); nor do they fall the same distance below the poverty line (poverty *depth*); nor do they all stay below the poverty line over the same length of time (poverty *duration*). The poorest are those who are on the bottom rung (or rungs), in all (or some), of any of these systems of characterising the poor.

## 2.1 Multidimensional deprivation

'The emerging consensus seems to be that extreme poverty is best represented by some combination of low purchasing power, limited capabilities, a high degree of vulnerability and a sense of powerlessness' (Islam, 2001: 9).

Commonly, the poorest experience several forms of disadvantage at the same time: these combinations keep them in poverty and block off opportunities for escape, sometimes across generations. Multiple deprivations interact and overlap cumulatively to deepen the poverty of the poorest to keep them in poverty over longer periods of time. Multiple deprivations, especially of key capabilities such as health and education, but also including low material assets and social or political marginality, limit the claims that the poorest are able to make within economic, social and political spheres, and therefore combine to keep them poor.

However, neither policymakers and poverty analysts, nor the poor themselves, give all forms of deprivation equal weighting. Clark and Qizilbash (2002) define a *core dimension* as a dimension of poverty that 'is part of *all* admissible specifications of poverty', and operationalise it as any dimension of poverty identified by at least 95 percent of respondents.<sup>3</sup> In South Africa, 12 core dimensions were identified by people living in poor communities: clean water, health, access to health care, housing, jobs, education, freedom, nutrition, safety, self-worth and respect, survival and religion.

## 2.2 Poverty depth or severity

This is the approach to identifying the poorest with which policymakers (and poverty analysts) will be most familiar. Severely poor, very poor, ultra-poor, hardcore poor, poorest of the poor, extremely poor, destitute, indigent ... each refers to *poverty depth*, or the shortfall below an *absolute* poverty line, usually based on the expenditure required to ensure food consumption adequate for survival (*food poverty line*). Those below the poverty line tend to spend a large proportion of their earnings on food, often without meeting minimum energy

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<sup>3</sup> Relatedly, Islam (2001) draws upon rights-based approaches to contrast two methods of identifying the poorest: minimalism (the poorest are those worst off in all dimensions of poverty), and universalism (the poorest are those who are worst off on any indicator, and are all equally worthy of assistance).



and nutrient requirements. This has a compounding effect on individual and household physical and mental ill health, debt and inability to work or study. Low energy leaves people, notably children, particularly susceptible to disease. Even a relatively short period of deprivation in childhood can harm child nutrition, health, education and aspirations, with serious repercussions for the long-term wellbeing of both the child and her/his own children. Debates continue about the differing calorific requirements of infants, children and younger and older women and men, engaged in different levels of physical labour, in different societies, but the majority of food poverty lines are set at or around 2100kcal/person/day.<sup>4</sup>

Incidence of severe poverty can also be measured as the proportion of people who fall below a certain percentage (i.e. 80 percent) of the 'standard' (i.e. food + non-food requirements) national or sub-national poverty line; an 'international' poverty line, such as US\$1/day;<sup>5</sup> a certain percentage (i.e. 50 percent) of the average minimum wage; or in the bottom expenditure decile. Irrespective of a large and progressive reduction in the poverty rate, there will always be a bottom decile; therefore, it is necessary to monitor improvements in the *absolute* status of the bottom decile for *relative* approaches to be policy friendly. Poverty severity in a population is also measured through *poverty gap analysis*, essentially measuring the average distance below the poverty line. Globally, out of 63 developing and transitional countries with data, there are 47 countries with more than a 25 percent average shortfall of the poor below the US\$1/day poverty line. India is included, and China is not far off this measure of severity.

As discussed above, poverty is multidimensional and, as such, the depth of poverty also can be measured in terms of a range of (non-money-metric) indicators. Severe malnutrition among children is often used as a proxy for severe poverty, and Islam (2001) suggests that a similar approach<sup>6</sup> can be used to assess severity on other capability indicators (e.g. education, health, housing, productive assets).

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<sup>4</sup> Schubert (2004) identifies recipients of a cash transfer scheme in rural Zambia, the majority of whom are economically inactive older people and children, as those consuming 1400kcal/day or less.

<sup>5</sup> US\$1.08/day in 1993 purchasing power parity (PPP). This is not the only option – UNDP IPC (2004b) has developed a line based on the typical poverty line among low-income countries in the late 1990s. Using the 'IPC1 line', the proportion of the population living in poverty in 20 of the poorest sub-Saharan African countries is nine to 119 percent higher than that based on the US\$1/day line – a difference of almost 70 million people. An 'IPC2' line, based on minimum nutritional requirements, falls between the two.

<sup>6</sup> Severe undernutrition and malnutrition – sometimes called *anthropometric failure* – in children under five years is defined as being stunted, wasted and/or underweight at below – three standard deviations below the reference population median.



## 2.3 Poverty persistence

The Chronic Poverty Research Centre (CPRC) argues that the duration of periods spent in poverty is as important as poverty depth and multidimensionality for identifying the poorest and understanding their experience of poverty and, as such, is a third *meta dimension* of poverty. Chronic poverty is also known as persistent, long-lasting, long-term and, in its most extreme and intractable form, intergenerational poverty. While the distinguishing feature of chronic poverty is its extended duration, the exact length of time that needs to elapse is, as with the level chosen for a poverty line, somewhat arbitrary. Intuitively, the chronically poor are those who remain poor for all or much of their lives, pass on poverty to subsequent generations or die a preventable poverty-related death (Hulme and Shepherd, 2003). The chronically poor, as compared with the transitorily (occasionally, sometimes, sporadically) poor, are likely to require a different set of poverty reduction interventions and/or additional measures to improve their situation.

Absolute, money-metric poverty lines have generally been used for the measurement and analysis of chronic poverty. It has been argued, however, that using multidimensional indicators of deprivation may more accurately represent the persistence of poverty. Some types of high capability deprivation – education for example – (a) are almost certainly a life-long phenomenon; and (b) lower the possibility of escaping from other types of poverty.

## 2.4 An integrated approach to defining the poorest

A combination of severe and chronic multidimensional poverty would unequivocally present the worst form of poverty and identify the 'poorest' – labelled by Clark and Hulme (forthcoming) as the *chronically core poor*. CPRC (2004) estimates that at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century there were between 300 and 420 million chronically absolutely (US\$1/day) poor people around the world.

It is commonly assumed that there is a significant overlap between the three meta dimensions of poverty – that people who experience the most severe poverty are least likely to escape poverty; that those who have been in poverty for a long time are most likely to fall further below the poverty line; and that those who are severely and/or persistently poor are likely to be poor in many dimensions. In fact, initial analysis (Yaqub, 2003) suggests that the relationship between poverty severity and poverty chronicity is complex and only partly understood, both at the country and household level.

Yet it is clear that the poorest are those who experience several forms of disadvantage – spatial, social, lifecourse related – at the same time. The poorest may be people living in spatial poverty traps, including remote rural areas, urban slums and regions experiencing prolonged violent conflict. Others are very poor based on their position within households,



communities and countries. Those who are severely poor based on discrimination include marginalised ethnic, religious or caste groups, including indigenous and nomadic peoples; migrant, stigmatised and bonded labourers; refugees and internally displaced people; disabled people; people with ill health, especially HIV/AIDS; and, to different extents, poor women and girls. Those whose severe poverty is related to household composition and life-cycle position include: children; older people; widows; households headed by older people, disabled people, children and, in certain cases, women.

However, not all members of these categories are either poor or very poor, as Seeley (2003: 8) argues in the case of South Asia:

there is nothing wrong with using caste group as a proxy if it does say something meaningful about socio-economic status. But not all scheduled caste people are poor, nor are the Scheduled Caste or 'untouchable' groups necessarily the poorest.

Based on research in rural Bangladesh, Sen and Begum (1998) argue that, because no single factor acts as a good proxy for severe poverty, it is therefore better to combine those that are most informative. In that context, combining land ownership, housing status and occupation identifies the poorest very well, with minimal leakage to the moderately poor or non-poor.<sup>7</sup>

The poorest are often identified by the poor themselves as having limited access to the 'right kinds' of social capital – without a healthy male breadwinner, for example, or a link to the centres of power in the community, the poorest are dependent on their own extremely limited assets and the goodwill of others.<sup>8</sup> As Devereux (2003: 7) points out:

Social capital can [...] go either way: people are destitute when they are forced to depend on the generosity of others for their survival, or people are destitute because their social networks fail to provide adequate protection against "normal" poverty and livelihood shocks, so the individual or household falls from moderate poverty into absolute destitution.

Some people may cope with poverty in ways that leave them adapted to chronic severe poverty, e.g. switching consumption away from higher quality food and non-food items towards inferior food, with the effect of increasing morbidity and hindering escape from severe poverty. The despair caused by the combination of long-term hunger, ill health and poverty, as well as responsibility for older people and other dependants, and lack of employment opportunities or any hope in the future for children, further debilitates the

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<sup>7</sup> See also the 'destitution index' developed by Sharp and Devereux (2004) for Ethiopia.

<sup>8</sup> See Purvez et al. (2003) for an example of community identification of the poorest in rural Bangladesh.



poorest people.<sup>9</sup> It remains a priority to assist those who are at risk of dying preventable deaths (Kanbur and Mukherjee, 2003). Methodologically, identifying poverty-related preventable deaths, estimating how many years of life were 'lost' and placing a value on such years are enormously problematic.

## 2.5 Poorest on my street, poorest in the world

In all world regions, there are strong spatial differences in patterns of chronic and severe poverty. A conceptual framework for understanding these patterns suggests integrating analysis of the spatial with the social, economic and political aspects of uneven development and deep and persistent poverty. These spatial poverty traps include 'remote regions' (physical distance and high costs), 'low potential or marginal areas' (in terms of natural resources), 'less-favoured' areas (politically marginalised) and 'weakly integrated' regions (poorly serviced). At an international level, sub-Saharan Africa has the highest *incidence* of severe and chronic poverty, whereas South Asia has the largest *numbers* of people in severe and chronic poverty.

An important consideration is which 'reference group' to use to make these orderings among the poor. The poorest members of one community, region or country – whether measured in terms of income and expenditure, length of time below the poverty line or extent of deprivation in a range of human capitals – will not necessarily be the poorest in the aggregate region, country or world. This is obviously the case when using *relative* poverty measures. However, it can also be an issue when absolute measures are used in the combined context of resource scarcity and the huge *numbers* of people living in absolute poverty in a few populous low- and lower-middle-income countries with relatively low *incidence* of absolute poverty.

Compare, for example, Sierra Leone and Indonesia. In Indonesia, it is estimated that about 14 percent of the population of over 210 million was unable to meet minimum nutritional needs in 2001 – or close to 30 million people. In Sierra Leone, one of a dozen or so smaller sub-Saharan African countries in which more than 50 percent of the population falls below a nationally set poverty line based on minimum nutritional consumption, it is estimated that almost 70 percent of the population of over five million was unable to meet minimum

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<sup>9</sup> Market collapse and unemployment, leading to multiple deprivations and starvation, are reported to have culminated in hundreds of suicides by skilled power loom weavers in India (Kala and Mehta, 2002). Suicides related to extreme economic shocks have also been reported as far a field as Azerbaijan, Brazil, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Thailand and Zimbabwe. While the statistical relationship between suicide rates and poverty rates is weak overall, the phenomenon of suicides among the desperately poor – sometimes of entire households, and often using pesticides – highlights the hopelessness and despair often experienced.



nutritional needs – or about 3.5 million people.<sup>10</sup> Scarce resources mean there are difficult ethical decisions to be made; this issue will be returned to in the concluding section of this paper.

### 3 Why are the poorest so poor?

There are many different reasons why individuals and groups of people are very poor and why they stay poor, and the poverty dynamics of the poorest follow many different trajectories. At one extreme is an individual born into multidimensional poverty, experiencing that poverty throughout their life and passing on poverty to their children. At the other extreme is someone born into a well-off household, able to develop their capabilities but recently driven into severe income poverty by a sudden shock. There are many trajectories in between, some ending with the ultimate outrage of being very poor: losing decades of ‘beings and doings’ through an easily preventable death.

In this section we briefly identify the main factors that drive people into poverty and severe poverty (drivers) and that keep them poor (maintainers). These factors operate at different levels, ranging from the intra-household level to the global level. Drivers and maintainers cannot always be precisely distinguished from each other, but this device helps us to understand the role that both concrete experiences (sickness, drought, domestic violence) and relatively intangible processes (economic growth, social exclusion, bad governance) play in making and keeping people poor.<sup>11</sup> We commence with the ‘maintainers of poverty’: these are structural factors that make poverty persistent and trap people in poverty. We then proceed to the ‘drivers of poverty’: the factors that cause individuals and households to fall or slide into types of poverty – severe, recurrent, multidimensional – that are hard to escape.

#### 3.1 Maintainers of poverty

##### 3.1.1 *Economic growth rates, growth quality and inequality*

Countries that have low levels of gross national income per capita, and low or negative rates of economic growth, tend to have high levels of poverty and severe poverty (in terms of income and multidimensional poverty), and much of that poverty persists at the individual and household level. Three important observations, developed by McKay (2008), need to be made about the linkages between growth and the poorest. First, pro-poor economic growth needs to be distinguished from economic growth in general. Second, since growth is an average concept, its distributional pattern is likely to vary widely from case to case and so the

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<sup>10</sup> Estimates based on UNDP-IPC (2004b).

<sup>11</sup> For greater detail refer to CPRC (2004).



impacts on the poorest will also vary greatly. Third, there is theoretical and empirical evidence that growth is most likely to benefit the poorest in more egalitarian economies.

Certainly, an absence of growth severely limits reaching the poorest, and many studies indicate that economic growth *generally* reduces the poverty of the poorest 20 percent of the population, although there are several countries that display perverse (i.e. positive) poverty–growth relationship (Mosely, 2004). Even in contexts where declining aggregate poverty rates are associated with growth, the distribution of benefits from growth reflects the pattern and quality of growth paths. This has considerable implications for policy. We can seek out patterns of growth that increase considerably the demand for the labour of the very poor, create demand for the services and goods they produce, as well as increase the resources invested in pro-poorest public services, to enhance human capital, and social protection to reduce the risks they face.

There are three categories of very poor people who face different constraints to participating in growth. Different approaches to economic growth, or complementary policies, are required in each case. First, there are those who are able and willing to work, but whose assets are not enough or not productive enough, or who face an absence of work (or markets for their goods and services), or work for extremely low returns. For this first group, the sectoral composition of growth (including broad-based agricultural growth, particularly, and in sectors where the employment elasticity for unskilled labour is high, for example in textiles) and the operation of processes of social exclusion (see below) are of key importance. Where growth is broadly based and social exclusion (along with inequality) is low, then growth can reduce both transitory and chronic poverty rapidly. By contrast, where growth is narrowly based (in oil or mineral extraction, for example) and social exclusion and/or elite domination is high, then the poorest will experience few benefits from growth. The poorest are not able to increase their access to productive assets, increase the productivity of those assets or achieve better incomes in the labour market.

Second, there is an ‘intermediate group’ of workers whose strength or capacity is not enough to work sufficient days to make a decent living, usually for nutritional, health or psychological reasons that are sometimes age related. Finally, there are those who cannot work and who rely on transfers. This group corresponds to Devereux’s (2003: 11) definition of *destitution*:

Destitution is a state of extreme poverty that results from the pursuit of “unsustainable livelihoods”, meaning that a series of livelihood shocks and/or negative trends or processes erodes the asset base of already poor and vulnerable households until they are no longer able to meet their *minimum subsistence needs*, they lack access to the *key productive assets* needed to escape from poverty, and they become *dependent* on public and/or private transfers.

For this group, any benefits of growth derive from private transfers from relatives and friends, and the degree to which additional resources are channelled into publicly funded social



protection including resources, such as nutrition support, or health and education schemes, which help people to work longer and more productively, as well as public support schemes, such as pensions, employment schemes and other public transfers (and the effectiveness of those schemes).

### 3.1.2 *'Poorly performing countries'*

There is a large number of low-income and transitional countries that have not made good progress on economic growth and/or human development, and where levels of chronic and severe poverty can be expected to be high or rising. The Human Development Report 2004 (UNDP, 2003) identifies 54 countries that are not progressing well towards a number of the MDGs, 38 of which are in sub-Saharan Africa.

Combined with the US-led international security agenda, an international desire has been generated to identify and develop specific policies for 'poorly performing countries'. While not 'failed' or 'collapsed' states (see below), these are countries that either have not progressed in objective terms or, more subjectively, are slow and/or unwilling to reform; are weakly responsive to citizen needs and preferences; have other deep-rooted governance problems; or present international relations that make them difficult to assist. In fact, it is sometimes the international political relations of a country that have determined the perception of its performance. And it may be a combination of international investment, aid flows and changing terms of trade that determines a significant proportion of performance over time.

### 3.1.3 *Violent conflict, weak and 'failed' states*

Millions of severely poor and long-term poor people live in countries or regions experiencing violent conflict, the breakdown of the rule of law and low levels of civil and political rights, with governments (and international institutions) that are, at best, only weakly responsive to citizen needs and preferences. These include several 'desperately' and 'moderately' deprived countries (CPRC, 2004) as well as some large states in big federal countries such as China and India (most obviously eastern Uttar Pradesh and Bihar). They also include a number of countries where data are too poor to make a comparative assessment, partly reflecting the difficulty of collecting information in conflict areas.

The effects on poverty are likely to be greater in 'collapsed' states, compared with areas where the state continues to function and to some extent protect entitlements. Even when 'peace' arrives, decades of effective action may be needed to 'catch up' with poverty reduction. A decade after peace came to Mozambique, only 36 percent of its children complete primary school, almost 20 percent of its children die before the age of five and maternal mortality runs at 980 per 100,000 live births. Further, there is evidence that wartime violence can leave a legacy of institutional, social and political violence, and that violent



relational behaviour – for example, sexual violence or police and army violence towards civilians – can become institutionalised unless directly challenged and changed.

The violence associated with the breakdown of the rule of law can also have a pervasive effect on keeping people very poor. In urban areas of South Africa, interviewees reported to CPRC researchers that crime rates are so high it makes little sense to start up even the simplest of economic activities. Poor households that could improve their income by raising a few chickens say it is ‘a waste of time’, as the chickens will only get stolen and attempts to stop the thieves would lead to violent, even deadly, retribution.

The factors underpinning desperate poverty in these situations are both direct and indirect: local, national and international forces that see violence as legitimate; states whose reach and legitimacy have been challenged; governments that have little interest in the conditions of their citizenry; economic stagnation; dependency on enclave oil or mineral exports rather than general taxation; historical legacies of group animosity. It is possible to argue not only that violence affects poverty and that poverty affects the incidence of violence, but also that the experience of violence constitutes extreme poverty. Cramer (2008) discusses these relationships further.

#### *3.1.4 Social exclusion and adverse incorporation*

The exclusion of people from a broad range of social, political and economic institutions leads to them experiencing a lack of capabilities that keeps them in poverty and deprived of entitlements. The concept of social exclusion gained currency over the 1990s, coming from analysis of developed country contexts where it was interpreted as exclusion from social security, housing and so on. It is more difficult to define the concept for a developing country context, as most are excluded in this way. In this context, the concept is extended to encompass multidimensional, relational aspects of deprivation and poverty. Commonly, such exclusion operates through varying forms of discrimination against certain ‘groups’ in terms of ethnicity, race, religion, caste, culture or migration, and is often reinforced by discrimination on the basis of personal characteristics, such as age, gender, impairment.

Adverse incorporation on the other hand refers to situation in which people are included in social, political and economic spheres but on unfavourable terms. This concept refutes what many see as a flawed assumption underpinning the concept of social exclusion: namely, if exclusion is the problem, inclusion must be the answer. In fact, it is possible to be both socially excluded and adversely incorporated. Indeed, this may be the dominant situation for many of the poorest. In many parts of the world, migrant labourers and their families are excluded from public services and the institutions of governance but are adversely



incorporated into the labour market. This may be a result of the structure of local labour markets or global commodity chains.<sup>12</sup>

Commonly, the structures of social exclusion – discrimination, stigma – create the basis for the processes of adverse incorporation – declining assets, low wages, no job security, unequal access to social protection, dependency on a patron. The ways in which risk and vulnerability shape social relations are of key importance. The poorest often manage vulnerability by developing patron–client ties that produce desirable, immediate outcomes (access to food, access to health services) by trading off their longer-term needs and rights (ability to accumulate assets, rights to change employer or vote freely, etc). ‘Staying secure [often means] staying poor’ (Wood, 2003).

### 3.1.5 *Cultures of poverty*

While quite a lot is known about the way parents ‘transmit’ financial, human, natural and physical capital to their children, little is known about less tangible assets – knowledge, personal skills, beliefs, attitudes, psychological resilience. This is particularly the case for poor people. Because of its controversial nature, the issue of whether there are ‘cultures of poverty’ that keep people trapped in poverty is often not raised. At its extreme position, this is the exact theoretical opposite of social exclusion. It posits that poor people are not poor because of social structures but because of their own agency. They adopt behaviours that keep them poor and raise children who follow these patterns. Such points demand consideration, given that they are often held by elites in developing countries (Hossain and Moore, 2001), by the public in Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries and even by poor people themselves (Bird and Shinyekwa, 2004).

Among the very poor, as among the rich and middle class, there are some people who act in lazy, irresponsible or imprudent ways. However, for most of the very poor, finding ways of helping them use their personal agency to demand their rights, seize economic opportunities and confront structural oppression is the means to provide effective support. Their agency is likely to be limited, ‘bounded’ by the nexus of social, political and economic relationships and the mindsets within which they exist and survive; measures to increase that agency may pose trade-offs with achieving the limited security provided by those relationships: the boundedness and trade-offs will vary from situation to situation, and need to be investigated in context.

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<sup>12</sup> For examples, see Daru and Churchill (2003) on bonded labour in South Asia and du Toit (2004) on fruitworkers in South Africa.



### 3.1.6 *Geography and agro-ecology*

As noted above, many of the poorest are inhibited by where they live, whether urban or rural, if the area is less favoured, weakly connected, remote and/or low potential (CPRC, 2004). This does not suggest any simplistic geographical determinism but rather acknowledges that in some regions there are 'logjams of disadvantage' (de Haan and Lipton, 1998) that are tied up in the broader political economy and that compound any geographical disadvantage: social and political exclusion because of ethnic status; thin and interlocked markets; poor governance; and high levels of exposure to asset-depleting risks. Once areas become disadvantaged, this disadvantage becomes too easily self-reproducing.

It is in such areas that hunger, famine and starvation are most likely to occur, and where social indicators such as infant and maternal mortality and access to services like water and sanitation are worst. At the national level, poverty in Vietnam, for example, is concentrated in populations that are distant from the coast and/or major cities. These are mainly upland areas that have low connectivity and often high proportions of 'tribal' people. The Human Development Report 2003 illustrates both a relationship between landlocked regions and increased levels of poverty, as well as between where the poorest live and conflict, with reference to Indonesia, Sri Lanka, Colombia and Nepal (UNDP, 2002: 8; see also Goodhand, 2001).

The factors underpinning regional disadvantage may have a sub-national dimension (e.g. poorly performing provincial government), a national dimension (e.g. public expenditure focus on 'better-off' areas) and an international dimension (e.g. neglect of remote rural areas in international development programming). In such contexts, private sector investment is unlikely, so markets remain thin, are often oligopolistic and are sometimes dominated by criminal activity.

## 3.2 **Drivers of poverty: Shocks, poverty and the poorest**

Poor people commonly identify specific shocks, or combinations of shocks, as causing their 'fall' into severe, recurrent, multidimensional deprivation. Why is it that some households can bounce back from a shock relatively quickly, perhaps experiencing only transient income poverty, whereas others are pushed into a downward spiral of asset depletion and increased vulnerability, culminating in severe and chronic poverty? While the nature of the shock (e.g. moderate/severe, gradual/sudden, limited/covariant) and the institutional context (e.g. presence or lack of safety nets) are important in explaining the ability to 'bounce back' from a shock, the nature of the household is also of crucial importance. The poorest households with few assets are relatively vulnerable to shocks; they are more exposed to hazards (at home and work and in the community); and they are least resilient to the effects of shocks. In a recent paper on the effects of environmental shocks on the poor of Ethiopia and Honduras, Carter et al. (2005) note that:



'While the patterns are different across countries, both reveal worlds in which the poorest households struggle most with shocks, adopting coping strategies which are costly in terms of both short term and long term well-being.'

CPRC researchers have encountered very poor people in slums in Delhi, Dhaka and Cape Town who have had markedly similar experiences. For example, houses built with flammable materials and crowded together make the spread of fire a very real danger; the fire brigade often cannot (narrow streets) or does not (political marginality) respond to slum fires, while at the same time limited access to water limits residents' own ability to stop the fires spreading. In this case, households have limited or no 'crisis funds' to fall back on and, with identity documents and pension books destroyed in the fire, may lose access to subsidised food, free health care and grants. Combined with damage to work premises, tools and equipment, the impact is severe and far reaching. In such circumstances, prospects for recovery are severely constrained. It may take years, if a household is lucky, before its members can recover to their 'pre-shock' status.

### 3.2.1 *Ill health, injury and impairment*

Health shocks are highly significant to the livelihood trajectories of poor people. The poor and poorest are more vulnerable and less resilient to illness and injury, and the sick and injured are more likely to become poor and stay poor. Commonly, a serious illness, or bouts of illness, to a poor household's main breadwinner can push a household into deeper poverty. In the context of overstretched, inaccessible and low-quality health services (see Grant and Hulme, 2008), the direct and indirect costs of treatment can in themselves initiate rapid asset liquidation leading to chronic poverty. Evidence from nine developing countries shows that the poor spend a much higher percentage of their income on health care than the non-poor. In northern Thailand, poor people spend 21 percent of their annual income on healthcare as against two percent for the wealthiest (Pannarunothai and Mills, 1997).

When an illness is chronic or terminal, the chances of a household falling into a spiral of debt and ill-being become high. In the past, tuberculosis and cancer typified such ill-health spirals but today HIV/AIDS is increasingly the associated diagnosis. When the death is a male head of household, funeral expenses and 'property grabbing' by the dead man's relatives can leave the widow and orphans virtually destitute. Serious and chronic illness is also associated with mortgaging land, taking out loans at high interest rates and becoming a bonded labourer. All of these increase the likelihood of a downward cycle of impoverishment. In addition to the huge direct and indirect costs of full-blown AIDS to livelihoods and economies, there is also social and economic discrimination against people with AIDS and people who are HIV positive. People with AIDS, and often their households as well, continue to be excluded from work, access to services and family and community life. This exclusion is based on misperceptions about the source and effects of the illness, and amplified by existing social inequalities, especially those of gender, sexuality, race and class. The



impoverishment of African widows by asset-grabbing in-laws has worsened owing to HIV/AIDS, as women are blamed for their husband's illness.

While there are very limited statistics on impairment and disability in developing countries, there is a large amount of case study evidence indicating that the poorest are more likely to suffer an impairment, and that such impairment is likely to trap them, and other household members, in poverty. The Chronic Poverty Report (CPRC, 2004) charts the cycle of discrimination and exclusion of the disabled and identifies the points at which this cycle might be broken. The continued neglect of the disabled by national governments and international development agencies remains one of the great oversights of national and international poverty reduction efforts.

### 3.2.2 *Environmental shocks*

The interaction between a natural hazard and vulnerable human populations creates livelihood shocks that often lead to impoverishment, the loss of capabilities and preventable deaths. Such outcomes are not simply the 'natural consequences' of an environmental shock. Public action can greatly reduce (or sometimes increase) the impoverishment associated with natural hazards. A classic recent example of the interaction of an environmental shock with a population whose vulnerability has been increasing comes from Malawi. Bad weather, bad policies and reduced resilience combined to cause hundreds, perhaps thousands, of preventable deaths.

Although the predictability of specific environmental shocks remains low, there does now seem to be firm evidence that such shocks will become more frequent because of global warming (Skoufias, 2003). As climate zones 'shift' over coming decades, those with the fewest resources (financial, material, technological, natural) will have greater vulnerability to new patterns of 'extreme' conditions. The poorest are almost certain to be the least able to adapt rapidly to climate change unless unprecedented levels of effective support are provided.

While environmental shocks are most commonly associated with rural people becoming severely or chronically poor, some urban areas are prone to natural disasters (e.g. floods in Dhaka, Bangladesh; volcanic eruptions in Goma, Democratic Republic of Congo). Protecting major cities from such hazards is important not merely for their inhabitants but also to maintain economic growth and provide effective governance so that poverty can be reduced.

### 3.2.3 *Violence and the breakdown of the rule of law*

While violence, and particularly ongoing violent conflict, is a 'maintainer' of severe and chronic poverty (see above), violence and the weakening of the rule of law can also drive individuals, households and entire populations into poverty. At the micro level, case study



research provides evidence of the ways in which violence can drive children 'on to the streets' (Conticini, 2004); force women into sex work; destroy the socioeconomic status and self-esteem of older women 'punished' for being witches; and lead to girls who are 'spoiled' by rape being turned out of their homes and made destitute. Much, if not most, violence is hidden away from poverty analysts, but there is a growing awareness of the many ways in which violence, or the threat of violence, can force people into severe poverty.

### 3.2.4 *Market and economic collapse*

Economic shocks can be powerful drivers. These can be caused by a collapse in prices (such as the recent collapse in coffee prices, particularly catastrophic in East Africa); an inability to compete with foreign imports following trade liberalisation (illustrated by the suicides of power loom weavers in India in 2000-2001); or, a collapse in financial markets (as happened in East Asia in the late 1990s, pushing some households into persistent poverty). Not enough is yet known about the distributional impacts of economic collapse on the poor and poorest.

Sometimes, shocks can be attributed to specific policy measures, both at the national and the international level. For example, the garment industry in Bangladesh was affected by the US 'Harkin Bill' against child labour, which inadvertently led to thousands of children, mainly girls, going into less safe, lower-paying work, with much more limited prospects – brick breaking, sex work, begging (King and Marcus, 2000). For many children, and the households dependent on them, a spiral of asset depletion began.

## 4 Why is it important to consider the poorest?

Massive poverty and obscene inequality are such terrible scourges of our times – times in which the world boasts breathtaking advances in science, technology, industry and wealth accumulation – that they have to rank alongside slavery and apartheid as social evils. (*Nelson Mandela, 3 February 2005, Trafalgar Square*)

The main argument for confronting, alleviating and eradicating the poverty of the poorest must be a moral one. Historically, it was the lot for most of humanity to be born into poverty, live in poverty and die prematurely. With the resources and knowledge available today, there is no excuse for those of us who are privileged to leave hundreds of millions of people trapped in poverty. The poorest people live in harsh environments and face multiple and extreme forms of discrimination, exclusion and disadvantage. It is unacceptable to exclude such large numbers of people from development because they are hardest to reach.

It is important to recognise that the poorest people are themselves the key figures in challenging their own poverty, and that they have a strong understanding of how this can be done. Indeed, few very poor people passively wait for assistance: most work very hard and



actively strategise to maintain and improve circumstances for themselves and their children. But it is both unethical and impractical to continue to depend on those with the fewest resources and the least power to sort out global poverty.

More self-interested reasons are often cited – improving global economic and political stability for rich countries, stopping the spread of disease, reducing terrorist threats and illegal international migration – and these can help mobilise public support for anti-poverty initiatives. However, the eradication of poverty among the poorest people is achievable only if a widespread commitment to global equality and justice is fostered and sustained among the world's powerful.

Economic growth that benefits the poorest is arguably in everybody's interest. Leaving vast numbers of poor people deprived and excluded limits the volume of growth possible and the extent to which growth benefits all the poor. Malnourished and sick people are less productive; vulnerable people will avoid risk; and illiterate people are less flexible to respond to opportunities. Incremental consumption by the poorest will tend to be of goods and services produced by poor people, so increasing this demand will have positive multiple effects and contribute to pro-poor growth. Arguably, increasing the incomes of the poorest is a greatly unexploited path to growth.

For the first time in human history there is now an emerging global framework for poverty reduction (the MDGs and PRSs), to which governments are committed. This raises the prospects for the poor and poorest to be seriously considered in policy analysis and to become actors in policymaking. However, achieving the MDGs would still leave 900 million people multidimensionally deprived. For some of the MDGs, unless the poorest are effectively included, the goals will not be met. For example, it is critical that the poorest are included if poverty and hunger are to be halved by 2015, as measured by two of the three poverty indicators (the poverty gap, which measures depth of poverty; and the share of the poorest quintile in national consumption). Similarly, it is essential to include the poorest if the universal primary education goal is to be met (measured by how close the world gets to 100 percent net enrolment). However, achievement of the other goals is currently measured against population averages. Where very poor people make up a substantial proportion of the population, the average will be reduced substantially by their non-inclusion. Reviews of progress towards the MDGs in 2005 present an important opportunity to suggest that these averages should be disaggregated to recognise the poorest.

The pursuit of the MDGs clearly presents governments, multilateral agencies and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) with important trade-offs between short-term efficiency in target achievement and longer-term effectiveness in terms of ultimate goals. Trade-offs between supporting the reduction of poverty of those near the poverty line (and preventing those above it from sliding back) on the one hand, with the poverty of the poorest on the other, should if at all possible be avoided. The poorest depend substantially on other poor



people for social protection and support and benefit from reduced poverty of the not-so-poor, or those just above the poverty line. This paper therefore argues for additional expenditures and specific policies to support the poorest, but suggests that this can be done alongside mainstream poverty reduction policies.

Currently, few PRSPs disaggregate poverty well, let alone examine poverty dynamics. If severe and chronic poverty is addressed later rather than sooner, it may become more intractable and costly to tackle. People who are 'left behind' in a process of development not only may resent it, and develop coping strategies, some of which may be quite negative for society as a whole, but also may eventually take much more to lift them out of poverty. There may be an effect of mortgaging future resources against present neglect.

There is some evidence that in some contexts the politics of grievance plays on poverty. Although this evidence is limited and generalisations are problematic, there are reasons to believe that the poorest may have fewer constraints and less to lose when politically mobilised to engage in violence than the poor in general (see Cramer, 2008). Development requires political and economic stability and security; however, a significant proportion of the poorest people live in regions, such as border areas, that the state does not reach very effectively, and where grievance-based mobilisation combined with state repression may contribute to undermining stability and security. On occasion, this may have regional or international as well as national repercussions.

Should donor agencies focus exclusively on countries with 'good' governments and policies where goals can be rapidly achieved? For example, should donor resources focus on stable countries that are economically liberalising (China, India, Vietnam, Thailand, Uganda, Kenya, Ghana) and avoid countries and regions that are unstable and/or not liberalising (much of Africa and the Middle East, Central Asia, parts of Latin America)? The implications of doing so would be enormous for the poorest within regions.

The moral case for reducing the poverty of the poorest is often undermined if it is perceived to entail unacceptable, impracticable trade-offs. Arguably, this is a matter of rights. The international community has signed up to rights charters and is obliged to protect and include the poorest. Decisions regarding the degree to which resources are allocated to avoid or reduce these trade-offs must be set within this context.

The developmental case can be questioned by market fundamentalist arguments that claim distortions will undermine general or average welfare. The thrust of this paper, however, is to argue that there are situations in which the general welfare is not being maximised through markets, and that this is the norm, not the exception. They can also be attacked from an efficiency point of view, in which scarce aid resources should be deployed to greatest effect, and that this may mean leaving the poorest until the general poor have been targeted. The response to this is threefold: first, the international community could use its current resources



more efficiently; second, aid resources could be used in more imaginative and innovative ways to work in difficult environments and with hard-to-reach people; and third, aggregate levels of aid are pitifully low and could be greatly increased.



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