

THE INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF HUMANITIES & SOCIAL STUDIES

Poverty and the Poor: A Critical Reflection of the Lines People Draw

Rev. Dr. Manya Wandefu Stephen

Lecturer, Department of Religion, Alupe University College, Kenya

Abstract:

State of poverty is not a desirable condition one may not want to find themselves in. And yet poverty has over the years generated a varied and at times heated and heavy emotional debates; both in public and private places. Religion has for many centuries dictated the way people have lived and acquired property. Thus religion has had a large share of the interpretation of what poverty is and is not. People however have had their own interesting way of interpreting the dictates of religious interpretation of the poor and poverty. This paper is thus based on the lines that determine to a large extent peoples' perceptions and attitudes in selected communities in Kenya towards those endowed with fewer resources in our communities today.

Keywords: Poor, the poor, interpretation, religion, Christian faith

1. Introduction

Situations of destitution, misery and being constantly in want is one of the topics that have been talked about in our life time. Presentations of such situations have come in differently based on one's perception and attitudes over such. Presentations of such situations have come in differently based on one's perception and attitudes over the same. For example, sociologists have seen poverty as more of a collective than personal responsibility; on the other side, anthropologists have seen it as personal responsibility. The religious die-hards have seen this as a curse from the devil or a punishment of wrongs committed by either individual or society. The economists on their part would claim that poor resource distribution is responsible for the poverty experienced in our communities. To a large extent this has made the definition of these terms - poor and poverty - difficult to define. To me, these are just but different shades of expression of the same concept. They are but lines that people draw concerning wanting situations that the poor people find themselves in.

2. Understanding the Poor and Poverty

Myers (2011), in his work, 'Walking with the Poor', wonders why we have to make great effort to understand poverty when it is very easily recognizable through its images presented on television and stories that are frequently told; since poverty strikes very frequently in different parts of the world. Sociologists, anthropologists and development scholars have over the years arrived at interesting conclusions that have exposed the condition and voices of the poor, and causes of poverty. Their efforts have enabled interested parties to develop an understanding of poverty and the perception or view that different society hold about the poor. Moss (2011) on the other hand sees poverty as a "multidimensional concept of human deprivation manifested in the absence of adequate food, poor health and lack of education." Moss contends that poverty units of measurement units of poverty measurement are varied; however, income is one of those commonly used because it determines what one can purchase. Another measure of poverty is quality of life of an individual and this is indicated by life expectancy, literacy level and caloric intake. Moss advances that a major problem with poverty eradication is poverty-trap condition, a situation where people are caught up in situations where they just survive. They do not have any surplus that they can invest to improve their income or food production. In such cases then, countries or individuals are not able to make investments like roads and schools which can accelerate economic growth and raise levels of income. At times the manifestation of poverty seems much less clear and in some cases it has created fatalist approach to development in which the poor are perceived as hapless souls with no chance for self-improvement. Despite the above, there are millions who have moved out of poverty. This in my view proves that no such perception exists. Moss (2011) claims that aid advocates would like to justify the existence of a poverty-trap in order to continue with the provision of aid. For him the aid business and poverty reduction by None Governmental Organizations consultants and any efforts that claim to reduce poverty, although humanitarian in approach, their main agenda is to transfer money from rich to poor countries. Although Moyo (2009) holds the view that for Africa to have economic growth it does not need help, he opines that transferring money from developed to developing countries is not the solution to poverty eradication. I agree with both Moss and Moyo in part, this is because resources transfer in itself may greatly transform a society. This is done by the creation of employment for the poor, and by extension the development of infrastructure by the rich does not necessarily become a preserve of the rich in their usage. The poor too will tread on the rich man's highway in search of

some amenities; though not in full but the benefits will be experienced. On the other hand they are right; this coming in terms of resources circulation which may end up draining the poor man's pocket even more should the basic commodity prices rise.

Myers (2011) presents a touching view of who the poor are in the eyes of the world. His argument is that they are looked at as an abstraction and not as human beings; just a case of statistics! I would agree with Moyo (2009), though it's not a case of statistics, these are real human beings, existing in actual sense. At one time I have lived in a major slam in Nairobi, the capital of Kenya. Here, many people view the poor as a helpless lot who have no names except for a derogatory label put on them to explain their state, their place in society and their identity. The identity that has been placed on the poor is to a great extent influenced by the location in society and the real or perceived socialization.

Several communities in Kenya have different labels for the poor and poverty in general, all of which carry negative connotations. Some of the terms used to refer to the poor by some Kenyan communities; to the Kikuyu the poor are athini, translates as , 'the suffering' 'the troubled', or 'the desperate'; the one who comes from down; the one who is unable; to the Akamba the poor are *ngya* translated 'the hopeless', 'those with nothing'; those who can't keep resources; the one who's future is managed by another and to the Gusii they are called *omotaka*, which denotes destitution and misery; one without anything; one who is in want; to the Luhya, *omutakha*, one who lacks though not entirely missing, suffering from deprivation, has some aspect of temporariness, one who is without anything, a naked one; one who doesn't have, one who is dependent to another, *Omumanani*, the vulnerable one, this is beyond *omutakha*, for *omumanani*, conditions and chances of moving out of poverty are extremely slim unless a miracle happens. This terminology may also refer to the poor as epithets such as *vagabonds*, the less fortunate, the bottom drawers of the society and lows of life's. Thus the *omumanani* becomes institutionalized by way of generation of the initial poor person.

From the above descriptions, the term creates an image of a person who is to be pitied and avoided; this perception and image in all cases determine how the poor are treated in our communities. Indeed the rich enclose themselves in gated communities; at times they drive cars not as a tool in aid of production but to avoid their poor relatives. We at times observe the rich wear mean looks to scare away beggars. When we view the poor as destitute, hopeless and helpless, it gives us permission to play 'saviour' or god in their lives. Once they are seen as objects of pity and compassion the world can do to them whatever it thinks is best for them, including neglecting them especially if it does not have compassion or pity. Based on this therefore, the poor have had a number of descriptions, such as 'the homeless', 'the miserable', 'the indigenous', 'the marginalized', and other words that explain where they have been placed and what position they hold in the life of the society. Myer (2011) observes that perceiving the poor this way makes them become welfare recipients, custodians of the government, objects of research and people (groups) that need to be helped, an act that enhances their poverty. He continues to say that, such a view makes the non-poor forget that the poor are people with names, created in the image of God and whom Christ loved to a point of dying on the cross to redeem them. This perception makes the world forget that the poor are people, gifted in various ways, have skills and potential to be part of the kingdom just like anyone else. In essence such labels overlook the fact that the poor are human beings who have minds, bodies and souls, and that they have aspirations like the non-poor and hence are an important part of the society. My understanding therefore is that the view we hold about the poor does correctly portray the picture of the poor are! In the same way I said before we assign to them an abstract statistical existence; where we only tend to place our rich imaginations and thought processes.

It must be understood that the poor are human beings with aspirations and potential to change their lives. We need to expose our bias against them and deconstruct the lenses through which we look at them if we want to work for their transformation. This calls for a change of our perception of them so that we view them as a people of God; created in the image and likeness of God, to be respected, honoured and valued in so much as they live. Myers (2011) does not refute the existence of poverty, but he is opposed to the biased opinion and view of the poor which the non-poor hold. All he is advocating for is an objective and balanced view, a positive image of the poor. If we are to work and achieve the transformation of the poor, we must first deal with ourselves by addressing our assumptions and worldview on poverty and the poor. However, it is difficult to change our world view unless we venture in, to understand the conditions that make them poor.

From the above proceedings, it is clear that different people view poverty by use of different lenses. Though from an academic perspective it may be viewed as theories, in this paper I will call them lines people draw. This is because this is just an individual or a group view of what they perceive as poor or poverty. More so, though it might be a group it begins with an individual mind before being domesticated as group. To a large extent this is what shapes and defines poverty by a sociologist, anthropologist, a religious person or even the economist. Apart from that this determines types of interventions or curers directed towards the poor and poverty at large. Interactions with the poor by the none-poor may also be determined by their understanding of poverty and its causes.

By extension, my interpretation of the terminologies and imageries portrayed before shows that the poor are responsible for the state they today find themselves in. For incidence, the Kikuyu community believes that the lazy and none industrious invite poverty in their homesteads. This is because they do not put their hands to work. The Swahili believe that to a large extent, poverty is brought by God e.g., *Aliyekupa kiti ndiye aliyenipa kumbi; Aliyekupa weewe ndiye aliyeninyima mimi*. Literally meaning that the God who gave you riches is the same one who denied me! What this mean is the institutionalization of poverty, such that poverty is either divinely constituted or humanly constructed, thus a predetermined condition. In such case it becomes a challenge for aid organization who faces the question of the origin of poverty; and being understood as above then the likely expected help for the poor may only trickle in. The question is, you made yourselves poor so work yourselves up, the same way you worked yourselves down. Alternatively, it is God's will for

you to be poor and I rich so resign yourselves to this God given condition without complaining, for He knows why you have to be poor and I rich. Even if I pulled you up God will take you back to His divinely constituted condition!

3. Institutionalization of the Poor

The definition of poverty is very fluid as I mentioned before, this is because of its relativity. As much as it is an individual problem, poverty is a social phenomenon that is found in different contexts and hence difficult to explain. It seems to me that different communities have established parameters and units of measurement that are used to determine and explain this condition. These parameters seem inherent within these communities that they have become part of them, so that whoever conforms is termed poor. These standards are an accustomed so that they help determine kinds of relationships the none-poor have with the poor.

Scholars in their effort to explain poverty have always oscillated between individual attributes and social systems as the main bases for causes of poverty, even though they have not totally agreed on the matter. In this case then, it poses a challenge to the definition of this concept of poverty and the poor. In an attempt to analyse poverty, different lines have been drawn, mainly by scholars and development practitioners. This section I will explore five of those lines. It must however be understood that these scholars think within a context, which to my understanding is community. These lines have emerged as society tries to understand and grasp this unfortunate they find themselves in.

In an effort to explore poverty and the poor, the liberal and conservative, have come up with different lines of thought that justify their explanation of poverty (Noble and Potter, 2004). The liberal thinkers have blamed the society for making her people poor through systemic economic and none-economic oppression. These liberals have claimed poverty on the economic, political and social systems in each society that block the individuals from accessing opportunities and resources to better their lives (Bradshaw 2005). In support of this line I am convinced that the said systems are skewed against the poor and hence none of their efforts can bail them out of their current situation. The barriers created by the powerful create walls that prevent the poor from getting jobs and opportunities to earn enough to catch up with the rich. The sectors that support lower level jobs suited to the poor lack sustainable growth. In the community where we are today, even jobs are shaped in such a way to suit the socially connected. Job descriptions are designed to procure the designate leaving out the undesired.

The situation of the poor is worsened by the inequitable distribution of resources that does not favour the regions the poor inhabit. The poor lack essential services like education, health, and communication, and are not able to produce enough food or in the case of those in urban areas, they do not earn enough for their subsistence. This concept of taking everything and leaving nothing for the poor has been referred to in Kenya as 'grabiosis', coming from the verb grab- taking by force.' For example, access to education is limited especially in the disadvantaged areas and those who have access lack essential learning facilities. Communities in such regions do not have a high literacy rate for they lack culture of learning and hence the reason for low achievement in education (Bradshaw 2006). The voice of the poor is not heard and their participation in or contribution to the activities of the day, particularly decision making, is negligible if any.

From the above proceedings it seems to me that from this line poverty is an institutionalized concept with its roots deep in the communities. That is, some people were designed to be poor no matter what happened to them! That the rich are by nature supposed to put in place structures and institutions of oppression to the poor. This is in total disregard to the individual upward mobility that can be experienced by individuals when appropriate mechanisms and approaches are advanced in-discriminatively. Thus, poor by design could be a societal loud silence; a line that societies have drawn!

As an institution therefore, the poor are unable to influence the political systems in place to access any economic benefits, justice and other services that they desperately need. This has brought them to marginalization, experience high morbidity and illiteracy rate, and are unable to access the institutions that should promote their welfare. Most of them have material poverty (they lack land and livestock or any other form of wealth) they cannot access services provided by financial institutions due to lack of collateral (Bradshaw 2006). Their children are not likely to complete schooling for they cannot afford the fees and other levies charged. Yes, institutional progression! Most of them live in dilapidated houses and those in the cities are relegated to the slums where sanitation is poor and most social amenities are unavailable (Habitat 2003).

4. Made Poor Because of Geography

The other line people have drawn in their effort to explain the poor and poverty has to do with geographical location or disparity. This characterization of poverty is based on the view that some areas experience poverty because of the prevailing geographical conditions and the poor distribution of resources which make them lack the necessary services and infrastructure that can better their life (Bradshaw, 2006). Bradshaw goes on to argue that this situation is associated with areas that have among other factors, low population density, few investment opportunities, poor or lack of access to resources, poor governance and poor communication network that reduces the rate of diffusion of innovation. These areas are not likely to have economic activities that can change the lives of the inhabitants or attract investors and even if investors want to take the risks, there are unfavourable conditions that hinder investment. As such the regions remain disadvantaged since the people lack the capacity to address these conditions or to demand equitable distribution of resources by their government. In such circumstances some innovative poor take advantage of prevailing opportunities to escape from their institutionalized condition by migrating to towns in hope of bettering their lives alongside the rich.

This phenomenon is common in developing countries where professionals escape to other countries where they are likely to get better compensation for their services. In Western Kenya, which is predominately rural; rural-urban migration is the order of the day. The able bodied and skilled have deserted their rural homes to search for opportunities in towns and cities. This has created slums that now pose a threat to the city settlement patterns now experienced in cities such as Nairobi ad

Mombasa. This migration has drained the rural areas of the brains and energy that could have helped in bringing change. In conclusion, this line postulates that the first class world is geographically advantaged compared to the tropical lands which in most cases has been classified as third world. In such a case then it can be inferred that people who live in Africa and related lands have a geographical curse.

5. I Believe So I am Poor

Peoples' belief systems have for a long time determined not only resource sourcing but who owns the resources of a particular community. In these beliefs and tenets that have for years determined peoples' relations; therein lies a big line that for centuries has set the divide between the haves and the have-nots. In belief systems have on many occasions been used to justify poverty and the poor. Because this is also intertwined with culture, this line talks of poverty and the poor as a cultural belief. Thus spirits are involved in making some people poor. In such a case then, the poor have not appeased the immaterial world. The spirit world as a way or discipline and a teaching to the rest of the community, visits the poor with poverty. Particularly the Akamba perspective of *ngya* speaks of this. As Bradshaw (2006) opines, this line looks at poverty as caused by the transmission of beliefs, values and skills that are held by individuals and passed from one generation to the other. One must appreciate that culture is socially generated and passed on through interaction of members of a community. Culture then is a generational concept.

What then is referred to as culture of poverty is a subculture of people living in slums and other poor regions where they evolve common set of beliefs, norms and values that are separate but still anchored on the main culture of the society. Once this culture evolves it tends to perpetuate itself, therefore, children born in this culture by the time they are six or seven years they are fully socialized into this culture to a point that even when opportunities to pull themselves out of it arise they are unready to use them to develop themselves. In my view, such a though must be responsible for the creation of the culture of dependency among some poor. 'My father survived under relief organizations, he has lived his full life; I will too. Here recipients of such aid perfect and pass on to their children skills of manipulating the system to continue benefitting from it instead of working their way out by seeking for employment.

No wonder then, that development work has had some challenges; first, it shifts their focus from addressing poverty to addressing welfare and makes the war against poverty difficult to win since we start fighting the consequences of our intervention. Second; that the causes and what constitutes culture of poverty is not yet understood (Bradshaw, 2006). This in my understanding is a hiding behind the spirits and their esteemed cultural cohorts. Among the Luhya the adjective, 'obumanani'- [poverty], is also said to be brought about by spirits. 'Chasing of such spirits away' is thus required for such a person to be rich let alone a hope for their generation seeing some resources! What is required is in essence is, breaking this culture-spiritual captivity for such people to be freed and not relief organizations. This line yokes the poor to the, 'as it was in the beginning, so it's now and tomorrow shall it be.' Proponents of such line have it that once poor always poor. It is a class distinction of people or people-resource balkanization, whereby some people are said to be rich by nature while others resonate to poverty through nature.

Bradshaw (2006) brings in another line that looks closely related to the Kisii- Iteso perspective of looking at poverty. According to these communities, poverty has a beginning, though the end may not be so clear. The claim is that some sins may sink generations to poverty without hope of the end. These include murder, not appeasing ancestors, incest and mistreatment of the disabled. These sins once committed poverty sets in as a way of punishment not only to the offender but their generations as well. Spirits of poverty increase with generations, thus the first generation will be less poor compared to the subsequent generations. The help of experts will be required for such a situation to change.

In essence the above is what Bradshaw (2006) seems to suggest. The main argument of his line is the individual and community wellbeing is negatively affected by a cycle of interdependent factors once they are triggered. For example, the closure of a factory in a community will lead to loss of employment by individuals who will no longer manage to pay fees for their children or afford health services. At the community level there is a likelihood of outward migration which will lead to closure of stores that leads to low revenue collection and as a result we have poor infrastructure because there isn't enough revenue to fund such development. Thus the effect of this change is felt by both the individual and the community and it slows down economic growth argues that this is cyclic; I pose a question, 'what if it is leaner?' The question one may pose to Bradshaw is 'what causes this phenomenon?' Definitely to me these are not spirits but human beings who mismanage the said institutions leading to people's inability to generate wealth. Although he advances the thought of cyclic poverty my own line is that of prudent management for sustained growth. However this cyclic line of poverty helps explain how for example economic factors at the individual level reinforce those of the structural factors operating at the geographical level to cause poverty of the individual and community levels. It helps to explain how multiple problems interact to form a spiral (linkage) which if broken it would weaken the cycle. The only challenge this may have for the reduction of poverty is the political good will. Economic linkages too may be hard to crack because they are strongly supported by other factors in the chain. For example, even though the closing of stores could be due to insecurity, the latter may be as a result of tribal conflict due to scarce resources. These are by no means 'spirits', and should be dealt with from none spiritual approaches including improvement of security measures and putting in place laws and regulations that discourage tribalism.

6. Conclusion

Poverty is not just a thought or a concept that confines itself within the confines of intellectualism or within the NGO desks, it is real. Specific, purposive and directional efforts must be put in place to cure the situation. This is a condition that has and is affecting many people under the sun; and thus these theories and lines people have imagined and drawn are of help yes, but a practical approach is best. It is important that political and socio-economic good will is procured for the cure of this

challenge to our world. These will fast track the upgrading of peoples' lives on the face of the universe to the glory of God. I am not sure that God in His bountiful nature can create people and determine that some will be poor and some rich; He desire that we all live a rich a rewarding life.

None Governmental Organizations and aid workers involved in reduction of poverty must not only raise and disburse fund in terms of economic development of the poor but must as well deal with these lines that people draw. I strongly believe that perceptions and attitude define communities' world over. Once these are dealt with poverty will to a large extent be effectively dealt with. In general collective responsibility is required in dealing with the concept and application of the recommended practices that help in poverty reduction.

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