

The poor need not always be with us

Society becomes easily inured to poverty. Some may say that this is partly owing to a Biblical apologetic that the poor we will always have with us. Or it may be that, while the more affluent are aware that poverty exists, it is so multilayered and complex – and so physically distant – that it is difficult to grasp fully.

THE WORLD BANK'S 'Voices of the Poor', based on research with over 20 000 poor people in 23 countries, groups together the factors which poor people identify as part of their penury. These include:

- Precarious livelihoods
- Exclusion from locations
- Physical limitations
- Women are the most affected by poverty
- Lack of security
- Abuse by those in power
- Disempowering institutions
- Limited capabilities due to genetic disorders
- Weak community organisations.

These factors, reflecting the poor's lack of means to meet basic needs, are mainly associated with marginalisation, exclusion and dearth of opportunity.

The conventional association of poverty merely with hunger and lack of money is simplistic. The dire condition and experience of poverty is exacerbated by the more virulent sense of worthlessness and of not

belonging – which reflects in tenuous social relationships or a desperate solidarity born of deprivation.

Even a cursory look at the everyday, public face of poverty should reveal the alienating effects of exclusion.

Driving in your car, you stop at a traffic light. A figure in tattered clothing and of unkempt appearance approaches you. The nauseating smell of body odour hits your nostrils and makes you retch. You press the button to close your window. Once safely cocooned in the safety of your car, you read the 'help me' appeal scribbled on a piece of cardboard. You decide to toss a coin, and you feel relieved and happy with yourself. You have done your bit! But your self-satisfaction soon crumbles into distaste as you are confronted by another beggar at the next intersection: "Where do all these people come from? Why don't they get a job and earn their keep like everyone else? I can't keep on giving!"

So the poor are stripped of their humanity. You did not even say: 'Good morning.'

PICTURE: CLAYTON SWART

China has reduced poverty, plucking 300 million people from its clutches in the last two decades.

Generally we assume that the poor are poor owing to some personal defect or weakness. Conversely we assume that our affluence is the result of our intelligence, hard work and diligence: we deserve what we have got; we have earned it.

Poverty in all its manifestations is one of the biggest challenges facing South Africa.

According to the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) and economist Andrew Whiteford, the proportion of people living in poverty in South Africa has not changed significantly between 1996 and 2001. However, those households living in poverty have sunk more deeply into poverty and the gap between rich and poor has widened.

The HSRC and Whiteford estimated that approximately 57% of individuals in South Africa were living below the poverty income line in 2001, unchanged from 1996. Limpopo and the Eastern Cape had the highest proportion of poor with 77% and 72% of their populations living below the poverty line, respectively. The Western Cape had the lowest proportion of poor (32%), followed by Gauteng (42%).

To alleviate this level of poverty the government has increased social welfare expenditure. More than 13 million peo-



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duced poverty, plucking 300 million people from its clutches in the last two decades. In 1981, 84% of China's population was below the poverty line of US\$1.25 a day (in 2005 prices); in 2005 the share was just 16%. This amounted to a 6.6% proportionate annual rate of poverty reduction.

The fight against poverty must start with the realisation that it is not a desirable state and that it can be greatly alleviated, if not eliminated.

We need to address the structural factors that contribute to poverty, the lack of livelihoods and resources, and a socio-economic and political dispensation that en-

ple now receive social grants, compared to 7.87 million in 2004/05. The size of grants helps the poor meet only the basic needs for food and very little else. Important though the grants are, they do not address the fundamental causes and experience of poverty as identified in the World Bank's study.

Poverty is not preordained, nor inevitable.

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genders and perpetuates poverty through avarice and rampant selfishness.

An economic structure characterised by monopolies and oligopolies in particular, and by uncompetitive markets in general, is bad for everyone, but devastating for the poor.

The recent revelations of price-fixing in a number of sectors in the country are a case in point. Collusion in setting the price of bread, for example, affects everyone but it is the poor who are impacted upon disproportionately by this – and by the rising food prices in general, as they spend a big proportion of any money they have on food.

Rising property values which are rampant in urban areas have crept to small-town South Africa, making it difficult for ordinary workers to afford basic housing. It is estimated that about a million people lost their jobs in 2009, swelling the ranks of the poor. The majority of these are the unskilled, who have little prospect of finding other jobs in declining sectors such as agriculture, manufacturing and mining. On the other hand, executive remuneration continues to soar. This is regrettable because employment is the best poverty buster. A growing economy is the best creator of jobs.

The positive effects of a growing economy are often nullified by a growing population. We must therefore continue with measures to reduce fertility and family size. While family planning may seem to be the obvious target in this regard, good education and healthcare, especially for women, are the most effective and holistic interventions. A healthy and well-educated populace is the biggest driver of economic growth and employment.

We must contain the greed that allows some to accumulate at the expense of others, and check the selfishness that considers caring for others to be cowardly, weak and contrary to modern and sophisticated economic life. ■

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