

Reflections on 'The Hidden Dimensions of Poverty'

I grew up in what is usually considered a 'lower class' household of six, and I live in the ancient Yoruba town of Ile-Ife, Nigeria, where I was born. Ours being a traditionally patriarchal society, my father worked outside of home – being the one traditionally assigned the role relating to the economic sustenance of the family – while my mother, like most other women, did unpaid domestic work and petty trading at home. As a teacher posted to one rural school after another, my father travelled to his home every week, leaving us some stipend for feeding and other household expenses until he returns by weekend. I remember that at least once, (I think it was during General Sani Abacha's regime), we were taken from town to my paternal grandmother's village, because there was no food for us to eat, traveling by foot for almost a whole day, such that by the time we reached our destination I could not walk again as my legs had become swollen and too weak to carry me. Today, I am a researcher, and I work with social and environmental justice movements like Africans Rising and ATD Fourth World. I told this story to make it obvious that my commitment to the building of a poverty-free world stems from my personal experience, and from a growing understanding of how the existence of poverty diminishes us all. It was Henry David Thoreau who said 'Who can best fight injustice if not the one who has suffered it?'

The International Participatory Research, and its report, *The Hidden Dimensions of Poverty*, for me, have done two things fundamentally: it re-affirms some of the beliefs which constitute the underlying conviction and motivation for me in enlisting my support for the cause of ending poverty; and it has also brought new insights which, no doubt, are helpful in this fight against poverty.

The study of poverty – and the reading of this report particularly – makes very visible the intersectionality of the political, economic, cultural and environmental injustices that we face. The most basic expression of the existence of unjust systems, laws and practices in any place/country is the subjection of some of those who reside in such a place/country to poverty. The suffering of any form of injustice manifests in the deprivation of life's comfort, and the extent of deprivation is connected to the amount of discrimination suffered. The report reveals that dimensions and modifying factors of poverty follow the forms of injustices listed here.

One thing that the research has further made visible to me is the practicability and imperative of the involvement of those who bear the major burden of the existence of an oppressive system in the understanding of that system and in the cause of changing it. One of the most profound yet simple definitions of poverty that I have seen is that given by a person subjected to poverty as reported on page 26 of the report. Rephrasing slightly, I came up with a definition of poverty as 'a condition in which the individual subjected to it is made to constantly worry about basic sustenance.' I have pointed this out to note how the involvement of people subjected to poverty in the reflection about poverty is crucial and how it improves our ability to understand it – just as their involvement in actions geared towards revamping systems birthing poverty is inevitable if such actions are to produce any meaningful outcome. I have read earlier in Paulo Freire's *'Pedagogy of the Oppressed'* of what he calls the 'banking system of education'

as differentiated from 'liberation education.' He condemned the 'banking system of education,' in which the teacher simply dumps knowledge in the head of the students, and advocated instead for liberation education, in which the teacher engages the students as co-interrogators reflecting on an object. So, I find it intriguing to see that rather than having 'researchers' try to study the situation in which those subjected to poverty are caught up, as is the way of traditional research about poverty, those subjected to poverty are themselves co-interrogators of their condition. And I think that this itself is liberating for those subjected to poverty, for their ability to comprehend their situation is enhanced by this process, and once they can understand their condition clearly, as a systemic and structural problem, it becomes easier for them to act in a manner to change this condition. This approach to studying poverty and oppressive conditions, I think, should be further emphasized going forward.

The language of the report – in which there is a pronounced rejection of the label 'poor,' which, as it now appears to me clearly, relegates or denies the person-hood of the individual(s) subjected to poverty – is noteworthy. And this shift needs to be encouraged across the board – I mean among people confronting poverty, opinion formers, and even those subjected to poverty. When we don't just refer to those subjected to poverty as 'the poor,' it makes it easier for people to not just passively accept the condition of poverty as a historical reality or an inherent attribute of those subjected to poverty. People are able to reflect on the horrific situation that poverty means and the complicity of the entire society in its persistence. The focus shifts, and the shame of poverty shifts from those subjected to poverty to those defending systems that create poverty. It results in more compassion for the plight of those subjected to poverty. Since reading the report, I have started using the phrase 'people/person subjected to poverty' instead of 'the poor.' I know that – as with most cases in which an attempt is made to change how we use language to romanticize immorality and reduce the gravity of vices – these preferred phrases may be considered wordy by some, but they strike me as more accurate. And I think that they would strike many in the same manner.

The report affirms that the existence of poverty burdens the entire society. My personal experience, reflections and readings confirm this to be true. I have said before that the hierarchical stratification of our society – as it is today, in which some persons lavish in flagrant opulence while many others lavish in misery – debases those made to wallow in lack, depraves those made to hole-up in illusory privileges, and diminishes us all. Within every human subjected to poverty, are latent talents which are more likely to be never discovered and/or developed and/or harnessed. And the less the community – whether we define it as a country or the whole of humanity – is able to harness the talents of its constituents, the less progress it is likely to witness, and the more burden of frustration, dejection and violence borne of the inability to give expression to innate potentials it would have to bear. And this point was made during the conversation we had at the University of Ibadan, on 17th of October, 2019, as part ATD Fourth World's commemoration of the International Day for the Eradication of Poverty, that the implications of the existence of poverty are burdens for the entire society, and that the responsibility for the overcoming of poverty is a collective one for us all – as individual countries and as an indivisible human race.

And still speaking on how the report reaffirms the outcome of the said conversation, let me quote directly from page 31 of the report: “We talked about the vicious circle. When you are born into poverty, you are more likely to be poor and remain poor. Because the system makes it harder to get out of it, it makes the situation worse. This is the idea of social determinism.” And then it goes on to say “We have talked about the poverty in which some people find themselves following a life accident...For others, they are born into poverty because their families were already living in poverty.” Nicole Mason, in 2017, said that 96% of Americans born into poverty never get to escape it. During the 2019 conversation that I mentioned, it was revealed “that poverty could either be situational or generational. People fall into the point at which access to basic needs becomes difficult because of circumstances and situations which too often than not are beyond their control. Once sunk into the vicious circle of poverty, there is then a great chance that they continue to sink deeper, to the point that it becomes transferable from one generation to another, unless there is a deliberate and concerted effort of rescue. Certain attitudes and addictions which may be observable among the poor – and which may sink them further into poverty – were identified as responses to valid aspirations which are not being fulfilled.” All of these have been re-affirmed by this report.

As reflected in the report, which identifies location as one of the modifying factors of poverty, places vary in terms of the number of opportunities which they afford those who stay in them. In regional planning, we talk of lagging regions – and how it is always necessary that concerted effort is made to bring opportunities to these places for those who reside there for these places to also develop. Take countries that have suffered colonization in the recent past for instance, which means – to use the words of Achille Mbembe – ‘constant displacement and confinement, forced migrations and coerced labour,’ and which also meant limited incentive for the creative investment of human energy, there is in these countries a greater chance of being poor by virtue of being born accidentally there. What is made more obvious, for me, is the fact that social and environmental factors, and not personal failings, determine whether people are subjected to poverty or not. And I think that it is important that we emphasize this so that those with privilege who have hitherto been apathetic towards the fight to end poverty, as a consequence of the dominant narrative which blames those subjected to poverty for the existence of poverty, may be shaken off their apathy.

The research, I would argue, has made available the much-needed fact-driven evidence to confront poverty as a collective problem – and to advance the fight to end it. The ‘Hidden Dimensions of Poverty,’ produced by the International Participatory Research which uses the ‘Merging of Knowledge’ approach invokes so much emotion in me, reading it, even as it provokes critical reflection. This report, I feel strongly, would help in achieving the much-desired shift in the narrative about poverty, from one that blames the victim of structural and systemic violence to one that places her at the centre of our concerns, from one that casts blame to one that shares responsibilities.