
EDITORIAL/REDAKSIONEEL

POVERTY

Poverty is a world-wide phenomenon which is widely prevalent in almost all third-world countries. The Republic of South Africa is no exception in this respect. In fact, poverty is the most oppressive and pervasive social issue that South Africa has to deal with.

Wherever poverty occurs certain key features of the phenomenon are evident, for example, the country's low economic growth rate; high levels of unemployment; the low level of education of the population; a decline in the purchasing power of the country's currencies; the inability of management corps to plan and implement development-orientated programmes collectively; a high prevalence of pathological social phenomena that coincide with poverty; and the low welfare status of a large section of the population.

One should however never lose sight of the fact that human being are the central issue in the phenomenon of poverty. The factors that cause poverty affect not only the millions of people that historically live below the minimum standard of living, but also the millions who are compelled by circumstances to lower their standard of living and hence experience existential crises. In addition to environmental factors, the causes of poverty can also lie in individuals themselves, in dysfunctional families, and the inability of individuals or families to process and manage the causal factors in order to extricate themselves from this unfavourable situation.

The causes of poverty are complex and should be sought in a combination of subjective or human and objective or structural factors.

The *subjective or human* causes of poverty lie in human beings themselves; some of the most important of these causes are mental disorder, physical disability, age, work-shyness, substance abuse and people with low or limited levels of education and training.

Objective or structural causes, on the other hand, are primarily economic in nature or the result of changes in the environment. Families that were once stable and self-sufficient now have to cope with the problems of poverty because of structural changes. Probably the most important structural cause of poverty is the weak economic condition of the country. Any economic factor that results in the loss of job opportunities is a cause of poverty. As far as the weak economy is concerned, several researchers (Barker & Backer, 1992; Barnard, 1995; Vorster, 1992; Wilson & Ramphele, 1989) refer to the following examples, among others:

- *Cyclical fluctuations*. In the economic environment there are cycles of prosperity, recession and depression. Poverty usually develops during the negative times and individuals and families do not recover very easily once the economy improves;
- People who do *seasonal work* in the agricultural sector usually only work for a few months in the year. During the times that such labourers are employed they cannot accumulate sufficient amounts to see to their daily needs and to tide them over the period of being unemployed. They are then very seriously exposed to poverty;
- A *skills imbalance* is also often a structural cause of poverty. This means that there is an imbalance between the skills that employers need and those which workers have to offer. There could also be an imbalance between the location of the vacancies and that of the job-

seeker. The condition of poverty currently prevailing in South Africa is to a very large extent due to these imbalances;

- Related to the causes deriving from the *skills imbalance* are the activities of workers in the informal sector. The report on Poverty and Inequality (May, 1998:20) clearly states that people in the informal sector are inclined to live in poverty even though they have work, seeing that workers in the informal sector are usually engaged in survival activities.
- *Dismissals* are a further structural cause of poverty. When dismissals occur as a consequence of poor economic conditions or affirmative action, the people involved, who are often responsible for families, are usually unprepared for this, or their own economic situation is not of such a nature that they can cope with dismissal. Such people then often have to surrender policies, withdraw investments and/or begin using up their savings. Their standard of living declines rapidly and they fall into a state of poverty;
- Large-scale *urbanisation* has extended the scale of poverty in urban areas considerably, but the poorest of the poor are still found in the rural areas. Such people have very few or limited skills and more often than not their standard of education is low. There is thus a close link between poverty and the environment;
- In some cases and among certain groups of people *population growth* can be the cause of poverty. This applies particularly to some women – women who often have no say or choice about another pregnancy. They may already have several children, are often malnourished and the burden of yet another pregnancy again deprives them of the possibility of accepting employment and hence of generating a better income.

It is clear that there are several causes of poverty. If there is any chance whatsoever of making a change in this situation, it is vitally important to reflect on the nature of poverty and then seek for practical solutions.

The report on Poverty and Inequality (May, 1998:73) offers valuable principles, criteria and considerations that could be adopted, along with other essential procedures, in addressing the issue of poverty effectively.

Thorough research and investigations, for example, will first have to be undertaken into the specific causes and consequences of poverty in each particular community. Every community should be approached as unique, because a programme that might work successfully in one community will not necessarily be effective in another. There may well be some corresponding causes and/or consequences, but it is essential to respond also to the differences. Each community is composed of a variety of people with different backgrounds, abilities and personal powers, and every community has a distinctive infrastructure and resources that must be utilised or exploited in accordance with the particular needs and abilities of the community and its members.

Apart from the fact different criteria have to be attended to, and apart from all the attempts to develop (for example) the infrastructure, or devoting attention to job creation by, among other things, the promotion of entrepreneurship or the establishment of a streamlined and cost-effective preschool programme, it will be necessary to devote attention to the FAMILY in order to combat poverty purposefully. Case studies (Barnard, 1995:85) indicate that the poverty syndrome has its roots in the family and spreads from there to groups of families, which in turn form poverty-stricken communities. In this way poverty is transferred from one generation to another and a culture of poverty emerges. The point best of attack is thus the

family. But combating poverty can clearly not be undertaken in a simplistic way. A comprehensive programme compiled from a range of strategies is necessary.

In determining a hierarchy of responsibilities related to meeting the primary needs of people who live in poverty, there are two points of departure, which are not mutually exclusive but rather supplementary – namely, the responsibility of the individual, the family and the community itself, on the one hand, and the responsibility of private welfare organisations and the state, on the other hand, to individuals and families that are oppressed by the burden of poverty.

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