

February  
2016 [no. 30]Mobilizing critical research for  
preventing and eradicating poverty**THE GREAT GLOBAL POVERTY DEBATE:  
IS SOMETHING MISSING?**

Neera Chandhoke

**Introduction**

In the last twenty-five years, Western philosophers have invested a great deal of energy on global poverty and have expressed concern that regions in the Global South suffer from debilitating deprivation. They have suggested that obligations to the global poor transcend national boundaries, and they have formulated normative obligations to the distant needy (Beitz: 1979, 2000, Caney: 2005, Moellendorf: 2002, Pogge: 2002). This debate has not gone uncontested for a number of reasons.

**Reproduction of Inequality**

The debate emanates from and is confined to Western intellectuals, speaking as it does of obligations of richer countries and citizens to the poorer Global South. Scholars and activists from the latter part of the world are, thereby, excluded by definitional fiat. Witness the paradox. Western philosophers speak of the irrelevance of national boundaries, but cannot conceive a universal humanity in which all of us have duties of justice to each other, or are seen as bearers of reciprocal obligation. Are we, who live and work in the developing world fated to remain consumers of acts, whether those of harm or of duty, performed by the West? (Chandhoke: 2010)

**The Issue of Agency**

In these theories the global poor remain faceless, they do not possess status, as if they do not struggle for justice, sometimes realise justice and thereby acquire agency. The debate does little to enhance the status of the global poor as agents. This is also the outcome of well-meaning civil society campaigns.

Recollect the campaign 'Make Poverty History' organised by 'The Global Call for Action Against Poverty' (GCAP) in 2005. It harnessed celebrities and movie stars to the cause, and skilfully used the global media to tell a tale of how 'we' can change 'their' lives. Significantly, the campaign conceptualised poverty as harm, such as premature deaths; as a calamity that affects women and children, as a violation of human rights, and as a blot on our collective consciousness. That poverty is an offshoot of highly unequal social orders was glossed over, and the campaign reproduced the flawed assumption of the global justice debate; i.e. the 'saviour' West. The campaign simply did not speak of a shift of power, or of global redistribution. Kate Nash's critical study of the



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This brief argues that:

- 'Poverty' today is a key concept that nudges sensibilities, and inspires academics, policy makers and civil society activists. Still something is missing. What?
- The 'global justice' debate obliges the rich west to do its bit for the global poor, but sidelines the issue of agency.
- Debates on poverty are seldom related to the wider debate on equality.
- Can we relate the right 'not to be poor' to the right to equality to offset these problems?

media-oriented strategy of the campaign (2008) told us that for the west, poverty was simply show business.

Monique Deveaux (2013) suggests that contrary to Pogge's (2002) understanding, poverty is nothing but "multi-faceted powerlessness". The antidote to such powerlessness is 'participation' or 'voice'. If poor communities join civil society campaigns, for say, land redistribution, or cash transfers, they acquire voice and thereby impact on national legislation. The poor acquire standing as moral agents, because they have the capacity to stand up in solidarity against injustice (ibid 9). In sum, political philosophers and policy makers must take the issue of agency and struggles seriously, because these struggles reshape political contexts.

## Poverty and Equality

A focus on poverty abstracts the phenomenon from the political context, but poverty is a relational phenomenon. It is not only that in a given society some persons are poor beyond belief, and others are rich beyond belief; poverty is relational. P is poor when she does not possess access to those basic resources which enable q, or s, or m to pursue projects. Therefore, p is not just poor, she is *unequal* to q, s, or m, since the latter three, unlike p, have access to certain advantages that p does not.

In short, poverty is the prime signifier of inequality. The poor are not only denied access to basic material requirements that enable them to live a decent life, they are likely to be socially marginalized, politically insignificant in terms of the politics of 'voice' as distinct from the 'vote', humiliated, dismissed, and subjected to intense disrespect in and through the practices of everyday life. To be poor is to be denied the opportunity to participate in social, economic, and cultural transactions from a plane of equality.

We might be able to deal with this multi-faceted phenomena, if we conceive of the right 'not to be poor', as an integral part of the generic right to equality, or the principle of the equal moral worth of persons. We might be able to make a move from sufficientarianism to egalitarianism. But then we cannot just invent or discover a right, and leave it to do its own work: that of garnering a degree of social and political acceptance and legitimacy. If a right is violated, citizens should be exercised or agitated about this violation. For this to occur, for society to feel deeply about the right on offer, the incorporation of a right into political thinking, into our values, and into vocabularies of politics requires a great deal of hard work. The right not to be poor has to be located in the discourse of equality, underpinned by a political consensus, and

legitimized by referral to this value. It is impossible to legitimise the right of persons not to be poor if a consensus on the desirability of equality as a value is simply not there.

## Concluding remarks

Can we reflect on the right not to be poor without *taking on* background inequalities? And unless we confront these inequalities directly, will not poverty continue to be produced and reproduced along with the production and reproduction of an unequal social order?

Is a transfer of minimal resources all we owe the victims of poverty? Or should we work towards a political consensus that poverty violates equality? It might be prudent to ground the right 'not to be poor' in a political consensus that persons *have* to be treated in 'this' way not 'that'. Poverty is more than lack of resources, and eradication of poverty requires more than transfers of resources.

## About the author

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