

# Poverty Alleviation: some ethical responses to breaking the chains of poverty

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## Summary

*The article analyzes a set of questions related with poverty and tries to identify some current challenges that modern societies must have to face, taking into account the absolute need to build a solidary world. The authors identify the different scales (international, national and local) of poverty alleviation programmes, in order to allow a better understanding of future challenges. There is a particular concern with the "ethical dilemma" to which societies must find positive answers. In the last part of the article, the authors mentioned the main issues that one must take into consideration, when it comes to future debates in the field of social cohesion.*

**Keywords:** poverty, solidarity, ethics, social cohesion.

## Resumo

*O presente artigo analisa um conjunto de questões associadas com o fenómeno da pobreza e procura identificar alguns desafios que, nos dias de hoje, se*

*colocam às sociedades no que respeita à construção de um mundo mais justo e solidário. Referenciam-se as diferentes escalas, internacional, nacional e local, sob as quais se desenvolvem programas de combate às manifestações da pobreza, de modo a facilitar a identificação de desafios para o médio e longo prazos. No âmbito do presente artigo constituiu, ainda, uma particular preocupação, a análise do designado “dilema ético” ao qual as comunidades têm de dar uma resposta efectiva. Por fim, enumeram-se algumas questões que, no entender dos autores, constituem áreas-chave de futuros debates no domínio da solidariedade e da coesão sociais.*

**Palavras-chave:** pobreza, solidariedade, ética, coesão social.

### Résumé

*Le présent article analyse un ensemble de questions associées au phénomène de la pauvreté et cherche identifié quelques défis que, aujourd’hui, se posent aux sociétés en ce que concerne d’un la construction d’un monde plus juste et solidaire. On fait référence a les différentes échelles, international, national et local, sur lesquelles se développent programmes de combat aux manifestations de pauvreté, de façon a faciliter l’identification de défis de moyen et court terme. Dans le présent article nous avons une spéciale préoccupation avec l’analyse du désigné “dilemme éthique”, auquel les communautés ont besoin de donner une réponse effective. On présente quelques questions que, pour les auteurs, constituent aires-clés de futurs débats au domaine de la solidarité et de la cohésion sociale.*

**Mots-clés:** pauvreté, solidarité, éthique, cohésion sociale.

### Introduction

There has been a great deal of reflection about poverty during the past three decades. The discussions surrounding poverty have been controversial: part of the controversial elements revolves around the true causes of poverty and the calculation of the number of people who should be considered as poor. Another part of the debate that is very much connected to the first is about the most appropriate method(s) to reduce poverty.

Inside the first “controversial issue” one must recognize that is not an easy task to clearly define a border to separate two different social classes: “the not poor” and “the poor”. This implies the theoretical effort to reach a satisfactory

definition of the so called “poverty line”. According to its own nature, a “poverty line” can be seen as an “income frontier” that divides the universe of people into the two categories we mentioned above. Usually, when it comes to international comparisons, the analysis of international poverty often begins with the \$1/day per capita poverty line. Nevertheless, each country can propose different income values, taking into account the living cost and the definition of acceptable standards of living that are based on, among other questions, cultural and social values inherent to a particular community.

The reasons that are given as to why people have incomes above or below whatever poverty line constructed are quite varied. Some attribute poverty to cultural factors, while others point to individual choices as the primary cause of a separation in incomes. A number of people describe how structures of power create systems where those who succeed do so at the expense of others. Still others point to unavoidable failures in the economic system.

Regarding the second question, “methods to reduce poverty”, the controversy usually lies in two different questions:

- a) What is the correct role for the state and for private institutions in poverty alleviation?
- b) What is the most effective level to conduct social policies that have, as the basic aims, the reduction of the number of people living below the poverty line?

The propose of this article is to analyse some ethical questions related to poverty alleviation, taking into account the theoretical debate in the last fifteen years and to present some possible strategies of poverty alleviation. This way, we will try to provide some reasoning related with the two controversial questions we mentioned above: nature of poverty and strategies/methods to fight the causes and consequences of poverty. The goal is to identify ethical responses to poverty.

## **1. Ethical Questions and Poverty**

In order to start our discussion, it is important to point out that ethical questions are, usually, related with the notion of “Choice”. This means, when we are addressing the questions related to poverty and ethics, we must analyse choices, both economic and political.

This is particularly relevant when the question at stake is not specifically poverty, but poverty alleviation, there is the means that a society, in a precise point of time, is willing to dedicate to eradicate the causes and consequences of that social problem. Across time and space the society choices over poverty

alleviation have changed significantly. From the traditional actions of religious institutions to the welfare system, and everything that it comprises, a long journey has been made. Nevertheless, across history, the notion that an «*increase in compassion and caring is essential*»(HARRINGTON, 1984:231) seems to grow inside the modern societies.

An important choice that society and individuals make that is related to the ethical methods of poverty alleviation relate to what cause of poverty people give most credence to. In order to fix the causes of poverty, it is necessary to determine the causes of it. If people feel that the cause of poverty is a system that unfairly picks some for poverty because of gender or skin color, an ethical response must address that unfairness. Those who feel that the cause of poverty is the result of well-informed individual choices would argue that it is unethical for others to have to bear the burden of those decisions.

Early Christian writers felt that markets were part of the root cause of poverty. They saw the importance of acquisition as going against the word of God and a destructive force in society. An emphasis on accumulation and personal gain benefited some, but was a direct cause of the poverty of others. These writers felt that the well off had had a responsibility to the poor, the community, and to themselves to help the poor.

The work of political economists in the late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> century did much to change this. Writers such as Malthus were interpreted as saying that the poor were different than the rich and that natural laws dictated that little be done to help the poor. At some point Malthus wrote that the rich could help educate the poor so that the poor would delay having a family and limit the size of the family to a manageable level (Jensen).

The debate in economics over the ability of policy to alleviate poverty has included many. Writers such as Marx felt that poverty was a direct consequence of capitalist exercising their power to control workers. The only way to end capitalist poverty would be to end capitalism. J.S. Mill felt that the distribution of wealth was a matter of choice and that a society could take steps to alleviate poverty if it chose to (Utilitarianism).

In the specific case of United States, significant federal government involvement in efforts to alleviate poverty began in the 1930s. The programs enacted during this time period are often described as necessary to save capitalism from itself. Others claim that these programs were the beginning of the end of capitalism in the United States.

It is important to remember the vital steps that were done after 1964, which marked the start of the “War on Poverty”. Not surprising, between 1965 and 1975, there was a dramatic increase in the production of scholarly works related with poverty issues. It was like an entire society rediscovered the relevance of

studying what lies underneath poverty<sup>1</sup> beginning with the definition of the poverty line that is still in use in the United States. Nevertheless, an important guideline was to consider as crucial in all these scientific works: *«research results should be oriented not only to the usual academic standards of methodology and theory; of equal importance is research geared to utilization in action programs»*(WILBER, 1975:177). This last point is relevant to our discussion, due to our concern in presenting, in the second section of our paper a possible strategy to poverty alleviation.

More recently, actions have increasingly been taken to reduce the level of federal government involvement in poverty alleviation in the United States. Welfare reform passed in 1996 significantly altered the way in which the federal government helped the poor. In addition to ending the entitlement to aid, the federal government let states experiment with alternative programs that sought to reduce the number of people receiving aid from the government. The goal to make aid temporary, and get people to work as soon as possible were significant breaks from past policy. Recent discussions regarding the privatisation of Social Security are seen by many as the next step in reducing the federal government's involvement in poverty alleviation.

Part of the reason for the changes in policy in the United States goes to the individualistic ethic that pervades the nation. The feeling that anyone can become successful with a little effort reflects a belief that is still influential. This is accompanied by a general lack of confidence that the government can effectively take actions that improve the quality of living.

We can consider poverty as a challenge and as sign that a project for a fairness society is still under construction. We can perceived better the nature of this challenge if we take into consideration the fact that *«poverty faces us a complex of threats to our potentiality for living well and realizing our dignity as human beings»*(JONES, 1990:16). In this line of reasoning, poverty is not only a problem of the poor people but something that involves the overall society. This way, we can conclude that a set of measures that will help the poor people to break the chains of poverty will have a broad effect over a society. Like Michael Harrington stated *«the importance of a programme and a policy to help the poor, will not only increase the living conditions of the poor, but also benefit the middle class: example – by making people more secure»*(cf. HARRINGTON, 1984). So, it is important to strength the notion that poverty alleviation will lead to a general improvement in a society and not only to the ones considered, according to a particular accounting technique, as poor. As David Hamilton said: *«the poor are*

<sup>1</sup> For instance see the Works of GLADWIN (1967), HAMILTON (1968), JAMES (1972), WACHTEL (1971) and LEWIS (1968).

*probably America's greatest unused resource, because talent does not seem to observe sexual, social and ethnic boundaries»* (cf. HAMILTON, 1968:119).

Under this perspective, it starts to become clear the notion of "choice" inside a society. A choice is related with a set of values that can provide some sort of guidance to policies, namely social policies. These policies should be aimed to deepen the society's democratic process and the self-esteem of the community considered as a whole. The persistence of high levels of inequality eroded the main basis of social cohesion. This to say, that a *«meaningful democracy is impossible in a society where the bases of power, such as wealth, are unequally distributed»*(ROBY, 1974: 21).

This way, it is possible to define the "choice" as a search for an answer to the following question: How far can, and should, we go in our commitment to the ones that "have less"?

In order to answer this question, several attempts had been made across time. Taking into account a second goal of our article we will consider the existence of three basic dimensions in poverty alleviation: International, national and local scales. This means, we are considering three different geographical scopes when it comes to selecting a strategy directed to fight the causes of inequality. In all the three cases, there must be an understanding that *«poverty is no longer inevitable. The world has the material and natural resources, the know-how and the people to make a poverty-free world a reality in less than a generation. This is not wholly idealism but a practical and achievable goal»*(SPETH, 1997).

The programs included in the so-called "International Scale" include the intervention of organizations such as the World Bank and United Nations. At this level there have been several important advances in recent decades. For instance, the negotiation to alleviate the debt of the poorest nations in the world represents an important element to support an international strategy oriented to the problems of poverty at a global scale<sup>2</sup>.

The "National scale" covers efforts being made to *«promote indigenous technological research and development of efficient, labour-intensive methods of production»*(cf. TODARO, 2000:193). This is a vital dimension of the poverty alleviation strategy at a national level, as it *«remains true that one of the major mechanisms for reducing poverty and inequality in less developed nations is the provision of adequate-paying, productive employment opportunities for the very poor»*(TODARO, 2000:271).

At a "Local scale" it is particularly interesting to call attention to the experiences of local microfinance, such as the ones promoted by Grameen Bank. This institution *«pioneered this kind of group lending, in which impoverished*

<sup>2</sup> See SACHS (2005).

*recipients (usually women) are given small loans of a few hundred dollars as working capital for microbusiness activities»(SACHS, 2005:13).*

In all the three geographical scales, it is important to stress the existence of an ethical principle *«to ensure that all the poor people, including those in moderate poverty, have a chance to climb the ladder of development»(cf. SACHS, 2005:24).* In this line of reasoning, one can conclude that the “Ethical Dilemma”, faced by the modern societies nowadays is, at the same time, a matter of political options and a case of global conscience.

It is our opinion that the political options and strategies should be target-oriented, in order to facilitate a critical overview of results and, in case of necessity, to promote the changes that guarantee the maximum efficiency of each monetary unit spent in poverty alleviation programmes.

In the last four decades the debate has been centred in two different basic issues: define poverty and poor and set a strategy directed to solve the problems caused by inequality. Taking into account the main goals of our paper it is important to remember that *«one fundamental strategy is to help everyone develop the skills, knowledge, motivation and physical capability for productive work» (PAGE, 2000:294).* Under this perspective, we can consider that more important than the simple help, is the necessity to provide to the poor people some tools and knowledge, that guarantee a capacity to self-improvement and self-sustenance.

To promote an independent life should be, this way, one of the most vital guidelines to the answer we mentioned above. The stimulation of entrepreneurship can be considering a possible, and most valid, orientation to a strategy aimed to reduce poverty.

The Grameen Bank and other programs that put the control of poverty alleviation in the hands of the poor are an important development in poverty alleviation. Another effort is to build social networks that also promote employment growth through the development and support of entrepreneurs. There is an explosion of university programs that teach entrepreneurship and support entrepreneurs throughout the United States.

One example of community-supported entrepreneurship is Enterprise Facilitation. The goal of this program is to develop a group of civic-minded business experts into a resource and support board for local entrepreneurs. This program seeks to use the expertise that is inherit in the community to help people build viable businesses. The board hires an expert to process information from people who want to start or expand businesses. This expert is trained to identify the strengths and weaknesses of the individuals wanting a successful business.

At this point many government sponsored programs help individuals by helping them get necessary training in the areas where they are deficient. The philosophy behind Enterprise Facilitation is that the best way to address indivi-

dual weaknesses is not to teach someone, but to help individuals build teams that have at least one person in the organization who is passionate about each necessary component of the business. It is the responsibility of the civic-minded board of business experts to help identify people who could help the entrepreneurs.

This type of program contains many elements of an ethical response to poverty alleviation. It relies on individuals taking action on their own behalf. The individuals need to make the first steps to contact the expert and will be given "assignments" to make sure they are serious about what they are doing. This kind of program goes beyond simply putting all the responsibility in the hands of the individual who is seeking help. The community is also playing a vital role in the process. The program will not work if individuals from the community are not involved in the process. The social network is vital to the success of the overall program and to the success of individuals seeking help.

While a program such as Enterprise Facilitation does not specifically target poverty, it can be a wonderful resource for people who are poor. The program does more than provide education to individuals and then let them go to fend for themselves. When the program is working effectively it is giving participants entry to an established social network. This is something that is lacking for many who are poor.

## **2. Some questions to the future Europe: "social welfare and economic reforms"**

In the last years, there has been an important debate (a debate that is still going on) concerning the necessity of promoting economic reforms inside the European nations, in the name of competitiveness. The majority of the proposals are directed to the liberalisation of economic systems, with the creation of conditions that will allow a higher degree of market competition. This way, we are talking about open the European markets to international competition, with the suppression of trade barriers, and we are making references to a bigger flexibility in the labour market and to some reforms in the European's social security systems.

Almost since the beginning, there has been a strong resistance these proposals: workers that are afraid of losing long term established rights, Unions that perceived these proposals as a threat to their influence, senior citizens that fear a decrease in their guarantees of access to services such as health and in their rights to receive their retired payments.

These different groups of citizens hold something in common: the fear from the abolition of their social rights. Recently, there has some been some openness



to negotiation: the idea that lies under the apparent flexibility is the following: Europeans seem to be willing to trade some sort of reduction in their social rights as long as there is some sort of maintenance of the main basis of the European Welfare System. Nevertheless, this is an open issue, there is, we still have a large room in terms of political, social and economic debate. According to our perspective, it is vital to concede a major relevance, at least, to four different questions:

- 1) The necessity to build and to reinforce a solidarity network, that will be able to soften some of the impacts of the economic/liberal reforms, particularly to what unemployment is concerned;
- 2) The gain of relevance of the local entrepreneurship, as a major key to promote a new wave of economic development, capable of taking advantage of human resources at a sub region scale;
- 3) A new effort in the field of co-ordination between international/state levels and local scale: there is a large field of improvement when it comes to co-ordinate the efforts of different institutions both international/state and local. In order to achieve better solutions in the of poverty alleviation it seems vital to promote dialogue and to establish communication bridges between European, State and Local Institutions inside EU.
- 4) The ageing population: this is a dramatic question, particularly to the Southern European Nations, such as Italy, Spain and Portugal. In these three countries, there was an enormous decrease in fertility. In consequence, the ageing population became a complicated matter to Governments, namely to what public policies are concerned. In fact, when it comes to Southern European countries, there is an "ageing feature" in poverty patterns. This way, the social policy must be aimed to a specific group inside the communities: the elderly citizens, that received short amount of money (under the form of pensions), that possessed a lower degree of formal education and, quite often, lived in a geographic isolation. To this particular group there will be the need to find a new wave of responses that allow these citizens to feel that they are a part of a bigger community.

This is a challenge to the next ten years. The quality of life inside European Union will depend, in an important scale, of the type of answers that will be achieved.

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