

DOING JUSTICE TO POVERTY

Christian Aid's understanding of poverty and its implications

A Christian Aid position paper

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Poverty is an outrage against humanity.
It robs people of dignity, freedom and hope,
of power over their own lives.

Christian Aid has a vision – an end to poverty –
and we believe that vision can become a reality.
We urge you to join us.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Human poverty is broad, complex and multidimensional, and its characteristics vary widely from country to country, community to community and over time. Fundamentally, **poverty is disempowerment** – a lack of power to exert personal, economic, political and social freedoms. It follows then that **poverty is political** – not a momentary lack of income that a gift might solve, but a process that results from structural causes. By implication, our work must challenge these structures – and so our fight against poverty must also be political.

Why this paper?

This is a position paper to locate Christian Aid in the wider debate on poverty, and it builds on a previous one ('Towards a Christian Aid understanding of poverty', 2000). It is also intended to have direct implications for our work. Specifically, our understanding of poverty underlies the decisions we make about the type of change to pursue.

In developing this understanding, this paper is one of a series of documents that seeks to outline our approach to change.

No Small Change analyses Christian Aid's role in social change, and aims to 'create an inclusive, shared framework within which to work, to make clear choices and decisions, and to create change'. *Making Change Happen* sets out the process of rooted advocacy that makes one important contribution to that change. The clearest gap is an analysis of the specific type of change that Christian Aid seeks.

How can we do justice to poverty?

Christian Aid's essential purpose is 'to expose the scandal of poverty, to help in practical ways to root it out from the world, and to challenge and change the systems that favour the rich and powerful over the poor and marginalised' (*Turning Hope into Action. A vision of a world free from poverty*, Christian Aid's Strategic Framework 2005-2010, p1). It is on this basis that we engage our staff and our

many stakeholders – whether we are working with partners and poor communities, asking our supporters and campaigners for their time and enthusiasm, lobbying policymakers or soliciting funds from individuals, companies and governments.

The eradication of poverty – and of the need for Christian Aid to exist – is our long-term goal. However, we must be realistic about our resources and capacity to drive such sweeping global change, recognising that we are but one non-governmental organisation (NGO). We have a responsibility to ensure that our limited resources are used to bring about the greatest possible impact on poverty.

To do this, we need a clear understanding of poverty and an analysis of how this definition will drive our work – our identification of issues and prioritisation of individual areas, our short-term tactics and our longer-term strategic decisions.

The final section of the paper offers an outline framework with which to assess which elements of poverty (which *change*) to prioritise in a given situation, with the hope that this will stimulate further discussion and help us to a clear and accepted basis for making these important decisions – in all our work, in the global North and South. This is a step towards the 'inclusive, shared framework' that *No Small Change* identifies – and to being able to do justice to our responsibility to fight poverty.

INTRODUCTION

‘Poverty is hunger. Poverty is lack of shelter. Poverty is being sick and not being able to see a doctor. Poverty is not being able to go to school, not knowing how to read, not being able to speak properly. Poverty is powerlessness, lack of representation and freedom.’

What is poverty?

‘Poverty is hunger. Poverty is lack of shelter. Poverty is being sick and not being able to see a doctor. Poverty is not being able to go to school, not knowing how to read, not being able to speak properly. Poverty is not having a job, is fear for the future, living one day at a time. Poverty is losing a child to illness brought about by unclean water. Poverty is powerlessness, lack of representation and freedom.’

The original Christian Aid discussion paper on poverty begins with the above quotation, taken from the World Bank’s ‘Voices of the Poor’ preparations for the *World Development Report 2000/01* on poverty. It notes that the quotation ‘reflects the widespread recognition that poverty is multidimensional, including more than a lack of income or material resources. Poverty is a broader concept in which insufficient income is one among many dimensions of human deprivation: limited control over assets, limited access to basic services, absence of work, isolation, powerlessness, voicelessness, discrimination, insecurity, humiliation and physical weakness. The ways in which these deprivations combine are complex and diverse, varying among countries and communities and over time’.

Here we set out a range of different views of poverty, before considering, in the following section why Christian Aid cares about poverty in general. This motivates us to identify a particular view of poverty that we believe the organisation is, and should be, led by in all the work we do. The final section sets out some implications of this for the way that we work.

Competing and complementary approaches

There are four main approaches to defining poverty in the development literature.¹ The first is what we may call the ‘list-based’ group. Of these, the ‘capabilities approach’, associated with Amartya Sen, is the closest to the established Christian Aid position. In this approach, development is characterised as a series of freedoms or capabilities, and poverty, by implication, is *unfreedom* – the deprivation of capabilities. Sen himself has deliberately not attempted to provide an exhaustive list of the capabilities relevant to a full life, but many others have – Sabina Alkire, for example, surveys 39 different attempts from 1938-2000, ranging from the liberal philosophy of John Rawls to the participative work of Robert Chambers and others.² There is, of course, considerable overlap between lists, but there is not complete agreement.

Within the same broad ‘list-based’ group are the rights-

based approaches to poverty. The internationally recognised framework of basic human rights – entitlements that all humans should have as a right to their humanity, such as access to shelter, education, security, political freedom, etc – provides another list. The difference from Sen is that a rights-based approach, while emphasising entitlements, has a concomitant emphasis on obligations. Approaching poverty in the language of rights leads naturally to a greater focus on these obligations than is the case with some other approaches, and we shall return to this difference below.

Robert Chambers is the originating researcher of the second main approach to defining poverty, the participative approach, which also includes the ‘Voices of the Poor’ work quoted above. Here, poverty is defined according to the views of people living in poverty – specifically, by working with small focus groups to identify needs. This approach is evidently the most empowering, compared to the external imposition of researchers’ views. It has, however, some important weaknesses. First, it is by definition subjective – people’s ‘assessment of their own condition can overlook their objective condition and can be biased as a result of limited information and social conditioning.’³ For example, if all the participants have learnt to accept grave gender inequality in their community, then this may not be raised – even if it is the most pressing element of poverty for many of the participants.

A second issue is practical – that both the conduct of studies and their interpretation tend to be carried out by external researchers rather than the community itself. Hence, in practice, the main theoretical strength of the approach tends to be undermined at least to some extent. The related question of which people living in poverty actually participate in the analysis is far from straightforward and has obvious potential to skew the results. Again, for example, if only male members of a community take part, then gender inequality may be less likely to arise as a concern.

The third approach is that of social exclusion. Originally developed to analyse poverty in rich countries, this emphasises the significance of processes that prevent individuals from participating in the normal activities of citizens of their society. Groups, rather than individuals or households, are often identified as ‘poor’ in this sense, since it tends to be groups – defined by, for example, age, ethnicity, gender, race, HIV status and so on – that are excluded. The approach is based on a multidimensional view of poverty, and often confirms that exclusion in one sphere is related to exclusion in another (such as education and employment). Applying the

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approach to poorer countries has been somewhat problematic since the definition of norms is less straightforward. For example, exclusion from formal-sector employment may be one form of social exclusion in the UK, say, but not necessarily in an economy where the formal sector is much more limited. An important feature is the implicit emphasis on inequality – hence, higher average incomes, or educational attainments, are likely to raise the level of income or education below which exclusion might be considered to exist.

The most limited view of poverty is the monetary approach, which identifies some level of income or consumption: a ‘poverty line’ (for example, one dollar a day) and counts people living below this as poor. The advantages of this approach are that it allows a relatively straightforward identification of the number of people living in poverty. Monetary poverty remains the most commonly quoted in, for example, media reports; notwithstanding the success of the United Nations Development Programme’s Human Development Index, which aggregates countries’ per capita income with education and health outcomes.

While the millennium development goals (MDGs) capture a broad range of capability-type outcomes, including those in health, education and gender equality, the emphasis of policymakers has been overwhelmingly on the commitment to halve extreme poverty – defined as the number of people living on less than a dollar a day. Given the recognition that poverty is rather broader than income, this approach is typically justified not by a claim that income measures utility, but that other components of poverty tend to be closely correlated with income, and hence that income proxies broader deprivation. Analysis does not, however, bear this out.⁴ Of those adults defined as living in poverty, with regard to education or health capabilities in studies of India and Peru, between 37 and 63 per cent were not defined as living in monetary poverty. Of those living in monetary poverty, between 38 and 94 per cent were not defined as living in capability poverty.

A further set of questions must be confronted before a satisfactory understanding of poverty can emerge. In particular, these include the choice between relative and absolute standards of poverty, and the length of time over which poverty is assessed. Any absolute standard (for example, a global monetary poverty line, set at income of one dollar a day) faces serious problems. First, the income level (even allowing for purchasing-power parity adjustments) corresponds to a different standard of living in different societies. The level

below which social exclusion can be considered to stem from poverty will clearly be higher in a society with a higher per capita income – a dollar a day is, in some important sense, worth less in a society where consumption expectations are higher. An absolute nutritional requirement (basic food needs) would have different (that is relative) income implications in richer and poorer societies. In capability terms, putting a value on literacy does not necessarily make sense in, say, the pre-writing era – and hence this is a judgement about poverty that is relative to the society in which we live, not absolute as it appears.

People living in poverty do not necessarily do so at every stage of their lives. Measuring over a longer period of time will tend to reduce the poverty count. Chronic poverty is a different problem from transitory poverty, and from living in vulnerability to poverty. Non-monetary approaches tend to reveal more about the long-term structural causes of poverty and vulnerability – such as insufficient nutrition pre-birth, or a lack of educational opportunities, gender inequality or ingrained social patterns of marginalisation.

WHY IS CHRISTIAN AID AGAINST POVERTY?⁶

The biblical basis

The Gospels illustrate that Jesus was deeply concerned for people who were poor or in some way on the fringes of society. He associated freely and often with the marginalised – ‘tax collectors and sinners’ – and welcomed the company of women and children and others held in low esteem in the culture of his day. They were the object of many of his healing miracles, and they took their place among his followers. The many actions of Jesus that are in themselves ‘good news for the poor’ can be an example for Christian Aid, while the prophecy that he read in the Nazareth synagogue provides some implications of what the practical implications might be.

The verses referred to above, from Isaiah, are a central part of the so-called ‘Trito- (or Third) Isaiah’ (Isaiah chapters 56-65), written in the years following the return of a small number of Jewish exiles from Babylon. They illustrate that this homecoming was not a great moment of salvation, as had been hoped. The first returnees found poverty and devastation: no infrastructure, no social, political or religious structures. Furthermore, they were disillusioned and guilt-ridden – their predicament a direct result of their forebears’ unfaithfulness to the God of Israel.

Third Isaiah therefore addresses a demoralised people, to reassure them of salvation in the future. The Christian calling is equivalent: not only to care for people who are self-evidently suffering physically or mentally, but also to address the underlying needs of those who, like the returning exiles, are quite simply disillusioned and disempowered – the victims of other people’s actions.

Isaiah 61 also demonstrates that the prophet is a mediator of God’s word. It is not the prophet himself who sets the captives free and binds up the broken-hearted, but rather the people who hear and respond to the prophetic voice. To that voice, Christian Aid also responds.

At the same time, our own actions must not be disempowering. The bringing of hope must not imply hopeless passivity on the part of those we would help. Nor must it put us, as donors, at the heart of the process. The concept of charity that drives us is the original meaning of that word – ‘love for our fellow humans’ – rather than the more common definition of ‘voluntary giving to others’. The poet WH Auden wondered, if God had created him to help others, then why had God created those others? Our concern for poverty reflects the view that the image of God is in all of us, and the constraints of poverty constrain us all. Fighting poverty is not

selfless; nor are people living in poverty inert objects of our compassion.

It is telling that Isaiah 61/Luke 4 speak of oppression (the prophet is anointed ‘to let the oppressed go free’), because oppression is a sign of injustice. Injustice – the systematic failure to love our neighbour as ourselves – is the root cause of much suffering in many different forms. Throughout the Bible there is the command to shun injustice, from Micah’s call to ‘do justice, and to love kindness’, to Paul’s comment on the command of Jesus, ‘Love does no wrong to a neighbour; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law’ (Romans 13:10). The message of Isaiah 61, renewed by Jesus in Luke 4, is a call to address suffering and oppression, and to recognise that these may take many different forms.

Our theology in action

Our Christian response to the suffering of the world’s poorest people has to meet three basic criteria: it must be compassionate, proportionate and effective. Think of Jesus miraculously feeding the crowds who had gathered to listen to him. It began because he had compassion on them after three days with nothing to eat (Mark 8:2). His response was proportionate to the size of the problem: he was able to provide food for all of them. And it was effective – so much so that there were 12 baskets of food left over. We see the same pattern in his healing miracles: they begin with Jesus’s compassion, and there are no half measures in how he responds to people’s needs.

Compassion is not just feeling sorry for someone. Compassion means taking on someone else’s suffering, and that means understanding both the nature and the cause of that suffering – so Christian Aid must strive to lead the way in our analysis of poverty.

Our response to poverty must also be proportionate. Where the underpinnings of poverty are local and contained, so is our response. Where they are international, so is our response. For example, a proportionate response to climate change lies not in encouraging recycling, but in lobbying national and international bodies and demanding binding international agreements and national legislation that will force us to reduce our carbon emissions – to a level that will seriously affect the lifestyles of all of us. We have to speak out and take action (Micah 6.8).

Finally, our response to poverty must be effective. In the absence of miracles, we cannot imagine that in the short-

Jesus unrolled the scroll and found
the place where it was written:
‘The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to bring good news to the poor ...’
And he rolled up the scroll ...
and began to say to them,
‘Today this scripture has been
fulfilled in your hearing’.

(Luke 4:17-18, 21, quoting Isaiah 61)

to-medium term we could solve all poverty and have the equivalent of 12 baskets left, so to do justice to poverty we have a duty to be as effective as we can with the resources we control.

In our work, both at home and overseas, we aim to honour our claim to be prophetic: in speaking out on major issues from a Christian perspective, addressing people and institutions whose values and culture may be very different; by engaging with churches on the basis of shared values, with messages and calls to action that many will find uncomfortable; and by encouraging our supporters to do the same.

CHRISTIAN AID'S APPROACH TO POVERTY

We do not make exaggerated claims to speak for people living in poverty, but rather recognise that we are speaking for ourselves, informed by our understanding of their experience.

It would be much simpler to define poverty as a lack of income, and hence focus on the processes of economic growth and of (re)distribution, but this would be to fail in our responsibility to work for people living in actual, complex and multidimensional poverty. Poverty is not only material deprivation, with the potential for short-term direct remedy, but also and more importantly the deprivation of opportunities for a good life. The absence of important capabilities, which do often, but not always, manifest themselves in material deprivation, is the deep scar of poverty. Poverty is broad and complex.

Christian Aid believes that an objective definition of poverty is possible. Final agreement on the exact components necessary for a good life may be elusive, but the broad contours at least should be uncontroversial. Monetary poverty may have some measurement advantages, but these pale when compared to its failure to capture fundamental aspects of the experience of people living in poverty. The capabilities approach (encompassing the earlier 'basic needs' view) provides the main framework, but our understanding is also informed by the social exclusion and participative approaches.

Belief in an objective definition of poverty does not detract from the importance of the participative approach. Its advantages – in being relatively empowering and in offering a definition rooted in experience – are far from trivial. Its flaws then imply two things. First, we must be realistic about its use as just one input in forming our view of the components of poverty. Were a community to exclude female education, say, from their definition of the necessary components, we would nevertheless continue to emphasise the importance of this. We are dishonest if we claim not to insist on our own views of poverty (however well-founded and objective we aspire for them to be).⁷ We are unapologetic about maintaining this approach.

The second point then follows: that in our (instrumental) use of participative approaches we are cautious. We do not make exaggerated claims to speak for people living in poverty, but rather recognise that we are speaking for ourselves, informed by our understanding of their experience. Where participative approaches can perhaps contribute most is in identifying those aspects of poverty that are most binding in a given situation – those aspects of poverty that most directly damage the prospects of individuals and communities to live a good life.

We believe a good first approximation to the components of a good life – that is those components the deprivation of which

can reasonably be labelled as 'poverty' – to be the following:

- **Personal** – health, education, mental well-being, decent work and leisure conditions
- **Economic** – income (as a basic aspect of material well-being), freedom from extreme inequality, economic security (that is freedom from extreme economic fluctuations)
- **Political** – political freedom, political security (that is freedom from political violence or instability)
- **Social** – community well-being, social relations, environmental conditions (including environmental security, that is freedom from environmental fluctuations).

These components of a decent life – the requirements for living outside of poverty – can be summed up as empowerment, not just social and political, as traditionally understood, but also personal and economic. To the original statement, made in 'Towards a Christian Aid Understanding of Poverty', that Christian Aid believes that poverty 'is caused by the misuse of power; by unequal power relations within and among countries', we would add 'and within and among groups and individuals'. Empowerment – by allowing not unlimited, but fundamental, effective choices about economic, social, personal and political aspects of a life – is freedom from poverty. **Poverty is disempowerment and the injustices that result.**

Finally, we would cast this empowerment as a right – to argue that people have a right to power over their own lives, a right to live outside of poverty. Such a right implies an equivalent obligation on the part of each person. To the local, national and global society that provides this right is owed an obligation to extend these rights to all others. As we benefit from this right, so too do we come under an obligation to struggle for its wider enjoyment. People living in poverty are not free of an obligation to society. Rather, their first obligation is to address the poverty that they themselves and their own communities face. Hence the obligation to address poverty is mutual; it is not a question of selflessness from those with greater power, but one of mutual interest in improving the world in which we live.

Some implications

One important implication is that poverty is a process and

not a moment, and one in which many of the elements are mutually reinforcing. Vulnerability to fluctuations in personal circumstance at different periods of life (such as before birth or during school years) can mould patterns of poverty. These might be driven by ill-health or low education and limited economic opportunity.

Social marginalisation is at the heart of the experience of poverty for groups ranging from dalits in India, to indigenous Andean peoples, to non-riverain groups in Sudan. Economic and political disempowerment are tied up in the processes of poverty experienced by many members of these groups. In some cases, not least Sudan, the state is fundamental in driving the various channels of disempowerment. In others, social disempowerment drives economic marginalisation and that in turn weakens political voice.

People can be forced into poverty through the loss of political voice, when channels of political representation are undermined by corruption in the domestic elite, or by the external restriction of policy space by foreign donors. In each case, the misuse of power strips important capabilities from those with less power. Both impoverish the country itself. A weak state can, by its weakness, fail to provide the basic public goods that offer citizens some protection from economic fluctuations and improve their opportunities for a decent life, and in so doing open up opportunities for some groups to capture the benefits.

Imbalances of economic power are fundamental to the issue. Appropriate regulatory frameworks are always required to ensure that the private sector contributes fully to society's goals. The power of multinational companies – which are often units of larger economic scale than smaller low-income countries, and sometimes supported by aid donors – can be great relative to governments in poorer countries. This can result in deals that establish investor rights without enforcing responsibilities – from labour rights and environmental contribution to tax compliance. Such deals can impoverish not only the country, but also the communities in which, and individuals in whom, the investment takes place.

In addition to the arguments above about relative and absolute poverty measurement, relative income is likely to have implications for political voice. If the richest thousand or so billionaires have financial power equivalent to that of the monetarily poorest 2-3 billion people on the planet, then only political systems that are demonstrably uninfluenced by money can deliver an equal political voice to members of each group. The implication of this is that inequality matters.

Poverty is political. Moreover, income and wealth inequality have demonstrable effects on outcomes such as health, and therefore life expectancy.⁸

By emphasising an understanding of poverty as a complex and multidimensional 'unfreedom', and more specifically as disempowerment, this analysis stands in sharp contrast to the monetary poverty approach. Perhaps inevitably, focus on the latter results in an emphasis on absolute poverty in regard to some fixed level (such as a dollar a day), and in a policy emphasis on maximising economic growth and managing demands for the redistribution of income. Monetary poverty is, moreover, primarily a poverty of the moment in the sense that it would be immediately dispelled by a simple cash transfer. People living in poverty become simply those people living on an income below some defined level. The label is completely transient, and should indicate nothing beyond this fact of current income.

Christian Aid's analysis of poverty

Christian Aid's analysis of poverty is effectively at the other end of the spectrum of potential views, and leads to a set of opposing conclusions. The first of these is that relative poverty is of at least as great an importance as absolute poverty – since *relative*, rather than absolute, economic capability can drive unequal access to political power and hence wider disempowerment. Where both exist is where most of our focus must be – from the relative powerlessness of low-income countries, combined with the absolute poverty of most of their citizens, to the absolute poverty and stark marginalisation of particular individuals or groups, such as dalits in India. Relative poverty in rich and powerful countries is, of course, important, but does not in general approach the combined depth of relative and absolute poverty faced in the countries in which we work.

Secondly, poverty extends to a range of aspects of people's lives, and hence multiple policy tools – not just economic growth – are required for an effective response. Finally, poverty is a process and not a momentary issue. This does not imply that immediate measures cannot bring immediate benefit, but it does militate against unfounded optimism about short-term possibilities (resulting, for example, from higher growth in gross domestic product or one-off progressive cash handouts) and in favour of pursuing structural change that, over time, can address different aspects of the process. A global political commitment to structural change designed to eradicate poverty could deliver rapid progress.

A cash transfer is unlikely immediately to relabel an individual who is currently living in poverty. Instead, their living in poverty reflects both longer-term characteristics of their lives and structural characteristics of the society in which they live.

Who then are 'the poor'? This now becomes a more complex question. 'The poor' are 'the disempowered'. Men, women and children living in poverty are not simply those living below some level of income, but rather those lacking power more broadly: those lacking economic power, but also those without political power or power over the social and personal aspects of their lives. Having recognised that, it follows – perhaps uncomfortably for some – that poverty is a more ingrained characteristic. A cash transfer is unlikely immediately to relabel an individual who is currently living in poverty. Instead, their living in poverty reflects both longer-term characteristics of their lives and structural characteristics of the society in which they live. For example, monetary poverty at a young age can result, *inter alia*, in reduced life expectancy as a result of malnutrition and in adult illiteracy – through inability to afford childhood education. These cannot be addressed by a subsequent cash transfer, welcome though it may be. Those living in such poverty in adulthood are relatively likely to remain so throughout their (shortened) lives, and policy analysis must take this into account if it is to be of value.

Other, deeper characteristics of lives in poverty reflect the economic, social and/or political marginalisation of particular groups – groups defined by characteristics of religion, ethnicity, caste, gender, by age or in other ways. Here the characteristics that increase the likelihood of living in poverty are not, or should not be, for the most part subject to change by policy – instead, the targets for change should be the social, political and/or economic structures that impose a higher likelihood of living in poverty on members of such groups.

A similar analysis applies to those living with HIV, with disabilities or as refugees from conflict or climate change. In these cases policy should be targeted also to the causes of group membership. One of our partners in Kinshasa, an organisation called Fondation Femmes Plus, works to support HIV-positive women, but crucially also to address the discrimination that is keeping them poor.

We do not talk of 'the poor' as if this were a permanent category, but of 'people living in poverty'; but we also recognise, are realistic about and respond to, the inertia that typically characterises the process of poverty.

Poverty can emerge as the result of shocks – driven by climate change (be they extreme weather events or longer-term changes in patterns of, say, food production), by conflict or by geopolitical events. Impoverishment is clearly possible, hence poverty eradication is not simply a matter

of addressing some group currently labelled 'the poor', but must, for example, address the conditions that give rise to and exacerbate poverty (for example, iniquitous international tax structures that can benefit shareholders in rich countries at the expense of governments in poorer countries) and include strategies to deal with foreseeable and unforeseen shocks (from contingency planning to the promotion of international structures that encourage macroeconomic stability and individual security).

In addition, shocks become disasters because of the vulnerability that poverty causes – that is, the fragility and instability of lives lived in or on the edge of poverty, be that experienced in the form of a lack of buffer stocks of food or money, or poor quality housing, or the absence of social networks or state structures to provide emergency support, or political voice to demand action. For this reason, much of our humanitarian work is not simply about acting in the aftermath of disasters, but also about building resilience beforehand. Our emergency work is also intended to build towards a less vulnerable future, hence the link to our development work is critical. Both are fundamentally about addressing the causes of poverty.

Finally, while the definition offered necessarily begins at the level of the individual living a life in poverty, the impact at other levels must not be omitted. As noted, identifiable groups (regional, gender, ethnic and so on) often experience poverty through political and economic disempowerment and through social marginalisation. Households are often the core unit in poverty, with a range of impacts on different members at different stages in their lives. Gender inequality means that household poverty often plays out to particular poverty of female members, and female empowerment (not least via education) remains perhaps the most important development strategy of all.

As a last category, much poverty is determined at the country level. It is no coincidence that larger economic units (such as China and India) have been able to make greater progress in many areas of poverty reduction than smaller units in, for example, sub-Saharan Africa. Among the multitude of historical and institutional factors affecting progress is the relationship between economic scale and political power – and there should be no surprise, in light of the nature of poverty discussed here, to find that the least economically empowered countries have typically found it hardest to obtain political power and to leverage this to their citizens' advantage. Within countries that constitute larger economic units, of course, it

is inevitable that stark poverty will be found at lower political levels, such as in states or districts – and not surprising that this often follows a similar pattern.

The difference can be seen, for example, in the contrast between the attempts on the one hand to impose radical trade deals such as the European Commission's Economic Partnership Agreements (EPAs), suffered by many smaller African, Caribbean and Pacific nations, and on the other the negotiated entry to the World Trade Organisation (WTO) by China. Inevitably, the latter was much better placed to protect its political and economic interests – to retain, in effect, much greater powers of self-determination. Our work to attack the international obstacles to effective national-level taxation should be seen in this light – as an attempt to enhance the opportunities for national self-determination and independent development, and to move away from the relative powerlessness of dependence on aid.

How will our poverty analysis inform our work?

Our chosen definition of poverty will influence our whole approach, as well as specific elements of our work. There are three key aspects of the definition.

Poverty is broad The concept of poverty is complex and affects many aspects of human lives. In particular, it is much broader than just income levels. Our work must reflect this complex reality and we must prioritise our efforts accordingly.

Poverty is disempowerment Fundamentally, poverty is a lack of power – power to exercise personal, economic, political or social freedoms. Our approach is empowering, supporting the work of partners and giving voice to the communities where we work, and helping those living in poverty to raise their concerns in forums where they might not otherwise be heard.

Poverty is political Poverty is the result not simply of a lack of income or other things in a particular moment of a particular life, but of deeper constraints that are structural in nature. The challenge for Christian Aid is to address these structures, not just to treat the symptoms – and that means that Christian Aid, too, must be political. We must strive for political change that fundamentally alters the structures that underpin poverty. We have a voice and the opportunity to be heard. To do justice to this requires that we be brave – willing to be radical and to take bold positions and defend unpopular causes, where this is judged the best way to attack poverty.

The manifestations of poverty, in our approach, are manifold – and so too are the causes of poverty. Moreover, we work in

multiple communities and countries, and in the global North as well as the South, and hence the range of poverty that we encounter and the range of possible responses are inevitably of great complexity. To repay the faith of those who work for and with us, and ultimately to do justice to poverty, we must embrace this complexity and seek to ensure that our efforts are not effective only in individual areas but in total.

Others have promoted 'growth diagnostics' as a way to analyse the key obstacles to economic growth and to prioritise policy responses accordingly, in order to get the greatest result from limited resources.⁹ In *Getting Growth Right*, we explored the effects of recognising that economic growth is not the goal, but rather one instrument among many to achieve the goal of sustainable human development (or, equivalently, the sustainable eradication of human poverty). By implication, the analysis required, on which to base our own work, is 'development diagnostics' or 'poverty diagnostics'. Since the goal is much more complex than economic growth, so too will be the analysis. This is compounded by the fact that we are aiming to achieve the greatest global progress from our limited resources, rather than simply maximise economic growth in a single country.

Nonetheless, we can begin to explore what this would look like. At national, regional and global levels, our analysis is already strong. The suggestions that follow are not intended to imply otherwise. Rather, they seek to offer a way to strengthen the sum of our analysis by providing a common framework – promoting the rigorous over the unplanned or improvised.

Distinctions made between countries (say, for example, those where the bulk of the population lives in poverty and those where average incomes are higher, but extreme inequality prevents progress) can be situated within a more comprehensive framework that reflects our full understanding of poverty, not only its economic aspects, and allows prioritisation of our work on that basis. The opportunities for learning, across country programmes and at regional and global levels, can also be enhanced by greater clarity of the relevant decision-making processes.

First, as country programmes begin to consider their strategies for change in light of *No Small Change*, they will develop and draw on an explicit baseline analysis of the character of poverty in their country – both nationally and among relevant groups. Our ongoing accountable governance work on inequality between groups will be a valuable input to this, along with existing studies of, for example, the

Our campaigning focuses reflect a combination of potential leverage and potential poverty impact – so both our climate change and tax campaigns are at their core concerned with promoting the right to independent development for people and countries in poverty.

extent of progress on the MDGs, which capture a number of aspects of our broader approach. In addition, light-touch participative analysis can be used as a way of identifying the most binding constraints that prevent those in poverty from living a better life. To the extent that this may go beyond the existing strengths of our partnership approach, empowering those involved could become a direct additional benefit of the process.

In this way, country programme assessments would combine evaluations of the areas in which most change is possible, and the ways to achieve it, with evaluations of the most important change for achieving greatest poverty alleviation. While not being constrained by regional and global priorities, the existence of potential overlap will clearly strengthen the case for some approaches over others – sometimes decisively. At its most simple, we will be able to assess the importance of each of the four identified areas of poverty; the level(s) at which change is required to address them; and our expectation of the degree of change possible. Our existing prioritisation of countries within the strategic focus areas of *Turning Hope into Action* is made through a similar process. The importance given variously to secure livelihoods, accountable governance, economic justice and HIV reflects our assessment of countries' priorities for the eradication of poverty. Ultimately, this will be supported by resource flows.

Second, the planning of regional programme and policy work can perform similar analysis, taking into account the results of country assessments and also the extent of additional opportunities at this higher level. Again, global priorities need not constrain these decisions, but will inform assessments both of the nature of poverty and of the potential impact of different (more or less closely aligned) approaches.

Finally, global-advocacy assessments¹⁰ will draw on both country and regional analysis in determining the most effective Northern-facing policy, campaigns, media, and lobbying approaches. In effect, these are restatements of the challenges posed by *No Small Change* – that 'if our work in different areas is not joined up, our efforts will be diffused. We'll miss opportunities. We'll have less impact. Joining up – no matter how diverse our efforts – is vital'. What we hoped is added here is the first outline of a process by which to justify decisions about where and how we join up. Our campaigning focuses reflect a combination of potential leverage and potential poverty impact – so both our climate change and tax campaigns are at their core concerned with promoting the right to independent development for people and countries in poverty.

The justification for action at each level – from country and regional to global – as given to the first of our Corporate Advocacy Priorities (climate change and, from 2009, tax), is a combination of importance to poverty eradication and of the requirement for action at each level to obtain effective change. The global nature of climate change (that only concerted international action can address), combined with the direct poverty and vulnerability impacts of increasingly frequent extreme-weather events and the long-term trends that threaten sustainable livelihoods (which need national and community responses, even if the required international deal is obtained), make the case for the priority we give it.

The importance of effective taxation – from empowering citizens by promoting responsive governments and empowering governments by reducing aid dependence to raising the revenues needed to provide basic levels of public goods according to nationally-determined rather than externally imposed development priorities – makes a strong case for its prioritisation. The combination of opportunities for direct domestic gains, with the need for international action to remedy the damage done by global financial flows that have been out of tax authorities' sight, confirm the importance of Christian Aid joining up work on this at each level.

Other areas of our work are also affected by this analysis. Our fundraising, for example, is not driven simply by a calculation about where most money can be raised most quickly. Instead, the required analysis takes into account not only the potential benefit of funds raised but also the other effects – including any costs – of raising them in a particular way. We will only use advertising or fundraising methods that are empowering and not divisive in communities. Fundraising from companies is based on an analysis of the net benefits for poverty eradication. We do not refuse to engage with businesses simply because we have some concerns over their behaviour, but nor do we solicit or accept funding from particular companies if our analysis implies that the benefit of their funding would be outweighed by the costs. For example, if accepting the funding would do greater damage to our cause by undermining our credibility and hence our ability to drive change in the longer term, or if it would support those companies (perhaps by improving their image) to do greater damage to our goals than the benefit we can create with the given funding.

Our definition of poverty is challenging for communications since the convention of referring to monetary poverty estimates is well understood by the media and the public,

Poverty is multidimensional and complex, and without an artificial allocation of numerical weights (as in the Human Development Index, for example) there will always be room for disagreement on any given decision.

despite its limitations. We will work to ensure that broader measures are always represented in our communications, while using monetary measures as appropriate – in particular for global comparisons where few equivalent indicators exist for broader poverty measures. The Human Development Index is also somewhat limited, but includes health and education outcomes as well as average incomes, and so offers one alternative for short communications of somewhat broader poverty.

To make *No Small Change* operational, and to start to improve our effectiveness by joining up our work, a shared analysis of poverty is required. Poverty is multidimensional and complex, and without an artificial allocation of numerical weights (as in the Human Development Index, for example) there will always be room for disagreement on any given decision. And yet, while not ignoring the problems that are created by the refusal to impose a simple (for example, monetary) definition of poverty, it will, we believe, be possible to develop clearer frameworks of the poverty analysis that underlies our decision-making and prioritisations. We hope this paper offers a first step in this direction.

Endnotes

- 1** This delineation of the four main poverty approaches draws heavily on Caterina Ruggeri Laderchi, Ruhi Saith and Frances Stewart, 'Does it matter that we do not agree on the definition of poverty? A comparison of four approaches', *Oxford Development Studies* 31 (3) pp 243-274, 2003.
- 2** Sabina Alkire, *Valuing Freedoms: Sen's Capability Approach and Poverty Reduction*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).
- 3** Caterina Ruggeri Laderchi, Ruhi Saith and Frances Stewart, 'Does it matter that we do not agree on the definition of poverty? A comparison of four approaches', *Oxford Development Studies* 31 (3) p 262, 2003.
- 4** S Franco, B Harriss-White, C Ruggeri Laderchi and F Stewart, 'Alternative realities? Different concepts of poverty, their empirical consequences and policy implications', *mimeoograph*, Queen Elizabeth House, 2002, quoted in Ruggeri Laderchi *ibid*.
- 5** This section draws heavily on 'Hope for the poorest of the world', by Paula Clifford, in Adrian Alker (ed.), *Together in Hope: Proclaiming God's justice, Living God's Love*, (Sheffield: St Mark's CRC Press, 2008).
- 6** Nigerian participant in the 'Voices of the Poor' study, a preparation for the World Development Report: *Attacking Poverty, 2000/01*.
- 7** One important caveat is that we do not proselytise: the views that we insist on are those that stem from our analysis and understanding of poverty. Christian Aid works where the need is great in nearly 50 countries, to ease suffering and stop poverty, irrespective of race or religion.
- 8** These results are found in addition to the effects of monetary poverty – see, for example, Vicente Navarro (ed.), *The Political and Social Contexts of Health*, (New York: Baywood, 2004).
- 9** See, for example, Dani Rodrik, *One Economics, Many Recipes* (Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2007) Ch 2, pp56-84.
- 10** Note that, as in *Making Change Happen*, we use 'advocacy' to refer to the entire process of bringing about change – from policy research, through to lobbying, media work and mass public campaigning.

The essential purpose of Christian Aid is to expose the scandal of poverty, to help in practical ways to root it out from the world, and to challenge and change the systems that favour the rich and powerful over the poor and marginalised.

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