

Poverty Eradication Needs a Relook
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Concerns with identifying people affected by poverty and the desire to measure it have, at times, obscured the fact that poverty is too complex to be reduced to a single dimension of human life. It has become common for countries to establish an income-based or consumption-based poverty line. Although income focuses on an important dimension of poverty, it gives only a partial picture of the many ways human lives can be blighted. Someone can enjoy good health and live quite long but be illiterate and, thus, cut off from learning, from communication and from interactions with others. Another person may be literate and quite well educated but prone to premature death because of epidemiological characteristics or physical disposition. Yet a third may be excluded from participating in the important decision-making processes affecting his/her life. The deprivation of none of them can be fully captured by the level of their income. Also, people perceive deprivation in different ways, and each person and community defines the deprivation and disadvantages that affect their lives. Poverty of lives and opportunities, or human poverty, is multidimensional in character and diverse rather than uniform in content.

Over the years, the concept of poverty has been defined in different ways – income, basic needs and capability. From the income perspective, a person is poor if, and only if, his/her income level is below the defined poverty line. Many countries have adopted income poverty lines to monitor progress in reducing poverty incidence. Often, the cut-off poverty line is defined in terms of having enough income for specified amount of food.

Poverty, from the basic needs perspective, is deprivation of material requirements for minimally acceptable fulfillment of human needs, including food. This concept of deprivation goes well beyond the lack of private income: it includes the need for basic health and education and essential services that have to be provided by the community to prevent people from falling into poverty. It also recognises the need for employment and participation. The third of these concepts, capability, focuses on the functionings that a person can or cannot achieve, given the opportunities he/she has. Functionings refer to the various valuable things a person can do or be, such as living long, being healthy, being well nourished, mixing well with others in the community and so on. No matter which perspective a country holds, the common agenda is to make poverty eradication a priority objective of the national development strategy.

Nonetheless, in the analysis of poverty in Malaysia, there, too, are certain habits of thought which seem to obscure its true nature and pervert identification of proper means for its eradication. Part of the reason for this lies in the disciplining of our minds by an academic training which continues to promote certain methodologies, categories and conceptualisations of aspects of reality which are biased towards its own perpetuation. On the other hand, another part of the reason is a fear of venturing into new territories, with methodologies, categories and conceptualisations of other realities which could result in still newer methodologies and conceptualisations.

Among these habits of thought, we may list the continued identification of poverty in ethnic terms. Another is the separation, only partially acceptable in terms of the statistics of ethnic distribution, of urban and rural categories. A third is the classification of causes into internal/cultural and external/situational determinants. A fourth is the ideological preoccupation with singular modes of analysis, an affliction of both orthodox and radical analysis. Finally, we may cite the insistence on the simplistic dualistic approach which falls somewhere between analytical orthodoxy and radical theory, and which characterises the western apologetic literature on Third World underdevelopment. The partial nature of these approaches is matched only by their collective collaboration in perpetuating these habits of thought. Yet, their sum does not offer the entire truth either. The real truth is, perhaps, that we must try to establish new categories and conceptualisations, or at least to rearrange old ones into new configurations which may provide insight into the real structure of contemporary poverty in Malaysia.

Within the contemporary situation and projected future of the country, the question of urban and rural poverty can no longer be treated separately. With the increasing penetration of the traditional rural sector by modern economic forms, and displacement of labour from rural areas through fragmentation of land, or lack of employment opportunities; with the attraction of urban areas, perceived or real; and with the mixing of both sectors encouraged by deliberate government policy of industrial, agricultural and regional development and their inadvertent impacts, explanations of poverty and its eradication must assume a more comprehensive form.

The most important fact about research on poverty in Malaysia is the lack of relevant and accurate data. The income data used in studies of income inequality derived from Household Budget Surveys and the Post-enumeration Surveys are purely indicative and are adequate only for the purposes of rough descriptions. But other important data and statistics are not usually available for any one point in time, thus, making it

difficult for relevant information to be checked against a benchmark, while time series are highly impossible to construct. Yet, for the development of useful models and theories, scholarly as well as policy-oriented, data is needed on, for instance, tenancy, land concentration, ownership of assets, operations of the labour market and their trends. Only when these are available can a theory be developed and verified.

It should be noted that the most important data for poverty research are also the most difficult to obtain and the most likely to be inaccurate because of the problem of falsification. In these instance, researchers either use highly aggregated cross-section data to make much more disaggregated inferences about larger aggregates. In both instances, their work is fraught with the danger of over-generalisation and over-simplification. One of the reasons for this danger is the fact that poverty is a multi-dimensional phenomenon. Thus, while a large mass of the population may be classified as poor, they may be so for different reasons, and therefore, require different policy approaches.

On the other hand, while the effects and experience of the poor may vary among sub-groups, the reason for their common state of affairs (i.e. their poverty) may be found in similar causes, especially if the causes are structural. In this regard, the formulation of strategies for poverty eradication is attended by various difficulties. In the first instance, target groups may be identified, and a package of special programmes for each developed. This is the approach adopted by the World Bank group where urban target groups, and rural target groups are identified, and regional development programmes and sectoral packages are directed at each group. Through this approach, Malaysia can demonstrate the success that can be achieved by integrating poverty as a major consideration in sectoral and national development strategies, and by setting targets for reducing the number of people living below a nationally defined poverty line. While the underlying theory for the rise of each of these groups may be sustainable, even if only partially, the separate demands of policy toward each may obscure efficiencies in a frontal attack on poverty involving all groups.

In the end, poverty reduction, and eventually eradication, must involve some redistribution of resources – economic, social or political – and that will sometimes be vigorously opposed. Any strategy to eradicate poverty must, therefore, take into account the fact that many people have a vested interest in the perpetuation of poverty.