

# Introduction

There seems to be a consensus on the basic configuration of the Philippine poor. They are ill-fed, badly-nourished, inadequately-housed, under-educated, and unorganized. What seems to be the subject of much debate, however, is how they got to be that way and how many they are. Let us consider each issue separately.

Explanations of the causes of poverty in the Philippines may be grouped into four main themes. Each theme equips the social scientist with a viewpoint and a vocabulary with which to interpret certain conditions as the causes of poverty, and consequently to point out those conditions which provide solutions to the poverty problem.

One theme looks at poverty as a pathological condition brought about by anti-development values, attitudes and "lifestyles" of the poor. The poor, because of their values and attitudes are, in effect, responsible for their own condition: they are resistant to change and their refusal to improve themselves — that is, to "modernize," results in deteriorating levels of living. A "culture of poverty" inevitably develops which perpetuates poverty unto succeeding generations.

A second theme explains poverty as the inevitable result of historical circumstances and the industrialization process, a viewpoint consistent with the "social disorganization" approach to social problems. It sees the pursuit of this particular path of development as inherently beneficial but that certain institutional changes — government policies or market mechanisms — have tended to exclude the benefits of development from being experienced by specific sectors of the population. The most popular of the themes, gauging from the number of papers written with this perspective, its most common proposition is that economic growth has been given a pre-eminent position in the economic and social strategy of the country with little, if any, regard for the problems of equity and redistribution. Allied with this perspective is the explanation that worsening social and economic conditions are a consequence of increasing population pressures on limited natural resources.

A third theme sees the problem in terms of power conflicts, specifically in the need of the poor to participate in the design and implementation of development programs which have been largely formulated by planners from above. Because the poor do not have access to decision-making processes, their interests are not reflected in political and economic policies. Powerless, the poor

become prone to exploitation and subject to deception by a series of "confidence mechanisms" which give the illusion that conditions are getting better.

The fourth theme considers poverty as the outgrowth of a political economy which has consistently (and throughout its history) concentrated the ownership of productive assets and resources in the hands of a small class at the expense of the large masses of people. The development process is seen as intrinsically exploitative because the main mechanisms for the perpetuation of such a system are the appropriation of the labor of large numbers of people and the extraction of productive resources for the profit of the ruling class. This type of development has, at times, been called "underdevelopment," or "dependent" or "subordinated" development. Within the context of dependent development, productive assets and resources are heavily tied to a global economy and may be said to be structurally dependent upon it for its endurance.

Dependent development is a legacy of colonialism which in recent years has been deepened by the accelerated thrust of capitalist expansion and accumulation. This thrust has its basis in two processes: (1) the total dispossession of the masses of people in the countryside from their means of production, thereby creating legions of landless agricultural workers and urban poor who have to sell their labor power for a pittance; and (2) the further fragmentation (and therefore, precariousness) of the means of livelihood of these masses, leading to their direct integration into the commodity economy while at the same time preserving their material reproduction outside of this economy. These totally or partially uprooted women and men provide to capital the raw material for exploitation and the realization of profit which results in their ever-increasing impoverishment.

The ideological hue which explains poverty colors its implications for action. While one observes that studies do not often have a stated ideology, the recommendations for action reflect the stance from which authors look at the roots of impoverishment. Adherents of the social pathology viewpoint opt for value and attitude change, particularly in motivating and training people to adopt modern practices. Those who take the "social disorganization" viewpoint are apt to intensify service delivery and infrastructure activities in the hope of providing people with the tools, skills and resources appropriate for an industrialized society. Others look to the national level and suggest policies which will lead to a redistribution of assets and resources. Some go as far as advocating transfer (to an extent) of productive assets to the poor. It would also be well for the poor to limit their family size to keep from dissipating already meager resources. In any case,

solutions lie in either reorienting policies or affirmative action within the system.

Those who perceive the problem in terms of power conflicts advocate conscientization, grassroots participation and community organization strategies. It is believed that these strategies, coupled with genuine assistance from government machineries, will help people to "rise" from poverty. It is also believed that greater participation will increase the poor people's access to decision-making processes. These strategies are viewed by many of its adherents as intermediate measures or as stepping stones toward self-determination on the part of the poor.

With few exceptions, the fourth general theme proposes no implications for action, at least not in so many words. Implicitly, however, its critique of a political economy suggests that a radical restructuring of political and economic systems is necessary to solve this inequitable state of affairs. Indeed, if the pursuit of capitalist demands is seen as the ultimate cause of poverty, then an alternative social system is desirable. The worth of the critique lies in the insights it gives about the iniquitous relationships and linkages of the present system on the national and global level.

It is not unusual for explanations of poverty to combine two or three of these themes (although the first two themes and the fourth are contending perspectives). It is often the case, however, that explanations of poverty confuse what are actually mechanisms for the maintenance or perpetuation of poverty with its root causes. It is frequently argued, for example, that the poor are poor because they are underemployed, or have insufficient income, or obtain low levels of productivity. This point of view loses its validity when one considers that had the poor been suitably educated or had possessed the appropriate skills to be able to compete in the labor market, they would be earning a sufficient income to get out of their impoverishment. However, they must first have the economic resources to be trained or educated adequately. The reasoning, therefore, becomes circuitous and rather than challenge the role of poverty, only points to mechanisms which actually maintain it.

A convergence of these themes is perhaps not practical, let alone possible. What is most attractive at this point is to collate a complex and wide-ranging set of facts and observations on Philippine poverty (and Philippine affluence) and, with an ideological openness, to consider the alternatives presented. Such an exercise is still to be done, and it should prove the most fruitful in terms of assessing the poverty situation. The intention would not be to come up with one cosmology regarding poverty, but rather to present a synthesis of varied accounts. The micro views of poverty provide insights to coping strategies on the individual and

household levels. Solutions derived from these insights tend to have circumscribed consequences. Macroviews of poverty may have broader applications yet sometimes fail to disentangle what is usually a complex mesh of causality.

It is not surprising to find that poverty is manifested in many ways and has many immediate and specific causes. As an empirical demonstration, the low productivity of some rainfed agricultural areas is attributed to the absence of irrigation facilities. It may be that tackling the immediate and specific causes will gradually ameliorate the conditions of the impoverished and eventually diminish their numbers. One then considers poverty as a temporary phenomenon which time, technology and more productive approaches will alleviate. Yet such a proposition is illusory. Piecemeal designs to eradicate poverty often run counter to bigger and broader designs of economic development. It would be well, therefore, to consider the alternatives and the broader consequences of these alternatives.

Immediate solutions are, at best, palliative measures. If one believes that broader changes can be obtained from within the system, then there is optimism for medium or longer-term solutions. It behooves those who are in a position to effect these changes to do so immediately. If one believes, however, that impoverishment can only be solved in the long run by a changing over to a rival social system, then it is likely that the poor themselves will affect their own changes.

The second debate centers around who are the poor and how many they are. While most will concur that poverty is a pervasive phenomenon in the Philippines, there remains no unanimity on what proportion of the population in the 1970s and 1980s can be classified as poor. The measurement of poverty in money terms or purchasing power seems to be a preoccupation of many economists. An income-derived indicator based on the recommended diet such as total threshold, when applied to 1971 data, identifies 78 percent of the population as poor. When linear program estimates rather than the recommended diet are considered, only 69 percent of the population fall in the poor category; when regional variations in prices and composition of a typical family are taken into account, however, only 45 percent of the population can be classified as poor. Regardless of the figure, the different researchers agree the incidence of poverty varies by place and social location. The incidence of poverty is higher, for instance, in rural than urban areas; among farmers and fishermen than among sales and construction workers; among the self-employed than among wage-workers; among the Eastern Visayas, Cagayan Valley, Bicol and Northern Mindanao regions than among other regions; among sugar cane wage-workers in Western Visayas than

among share-tenants in sugar farms in Luzon; among young and old persons than among middle-aged persons; and among persons with lower than higher levels of education. There is also some consensus that patterns of inequality have remained constant over the years and that income inequality, or the gap between the rich and the poor, had worsened over time.

But income indicators are not the sole measures of poverty. Several authors point out related features, among them; caloric intake, morbidity rates, unemployment, access to social services, landlessness, adequacy of dwelling unit, life expectancy, tenurial change, powerlessness, perceived quality of life, and levels of community complexity. The precise relationships between these indicators and income-based measures have yet to be analyzed, and perhaps combined as an index. All they reveal at the moment is that poverty possesses economic, social, and political dimensions.

Nonetheless, what is illuminating about the indicators of poverty is the many other configurations of impoverishment that it reveals. The "subclasses" of the poor differ in how they are afflicted with poverty and how they respond to it. The heterogeneity of poor classes gives strong argument to our reluctance to use "poor" as an analytical category, much in the same way that "masses" is merely a descriptive category. It is more useful to refer to analytical concepts, as for example, landless agricultural workers, or an industrial reserve army of low-paid labor, or subsistence fishermen. These terms are specific and point to particular situations, and preclude one from looking at the poor as an undifferentiated mass. Nonetheless, these concepts must be related to the broader context of societal operations.

However one views the causes of impoverishment, it is a "situation" which begs for intervention. So that far from being mere academic or policy exercises, studies on impoverishment must in the future bear responsibility for generating long-range solutions. In other words, it is a situation for which something must be done.

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