Eradicating Epidemiological Poverty: Tomorrow’s Paradigm

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Shifting Development Paradigms

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10.27.2022

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# We treat poverty as a symptom we can solve, one underlying condition at a time, one community at a time, rather than a disease, an epidemic, a terminal illness with a cure in sight. And that inherently is unfair to the poorest billion, whose plight is deemed an acceptable loss or even the reasonable collateral damage of capitalism by the international community. Preventable mortality care is attainable, however convincing the international focus to shift from targeted intervention to universal social minimums will be a centennial feat.

# The paradigm shift I wish most to see in my lifetime, is the end of public and privately funded, developed state driven international development organizations, due to lack of need. But for this shift to be actualized, I acknowledge there are poverty roadblocks that must be addressed and eradicated, not by incremental top-down development goals but by grassroot led organizations and the primary stakeholders.

# First, the global community must realize a consensus on a non-fiscal definition of poverty and agree on a Universal Declaration of Social Minimums for its metrics. And for each developing state to meet these new metrics, their debt must be forgiven, and reparations due to the ugly effects of colonialism and development drive carbon emission must be provided. We must shift how we view development, from economic standings as the primary ranking system, to one where social cohesion and peaceful governance is the global currency for excellence.

# Redefining Poverty

# To treat an epidemic, we must specify the virus in question. The UN defines poverty as, “income of less than US $2 per day, including one billion children” (United Nations, n.d.), the World Bank and OECD tout similar definitions (World Bank, n.d.) (OECD, 2022). The problem with these definitions is they are fiscal in nature. If the solution were merely money, the problem could be solved by providing the bottom billion a lifetime income that places them slightly above the global poverty line. Unfortunately, three main faults lie with this solution: inflation will continually move the poverty line out of reach for the bottom billion if only direct aid is distributed, the causes of global poverty are not addressed, and the capitalistic system which allows for the creation of an impoverished class remains unchallenged.

# Poverty’s definition needs a revamp, from the minimum amount of money needed to purchase an adult’s caloric needs for a day (Walton, 2020) to the lack of minimum societal services required for persons to live the entirety of the average lifespan. Also to be considered as part of poverty’s new definition, is how and where individual agency or the lack thereof comes into play. A person with all basic provisions but their livelihood is predetermined may be considered impoverished in spirit, if they do not find meaning nor inspiration within their work. A holistic view of poverty must consider the physical and psychological ramifications of survival.

# Social Minimums

# Unfortunately donors and donor organizations require evidence of effective intervention is measured by quantifiable success to continue supporting interventions; it is disheartening that the decisions of where to target interventions often depends on expected or past effectiveness. This puts a value on human life, and many lives are evaluated unequally if not deemed worthy of fiscal risk. Even if only one member of a community is saved from the devastating effects of extreme poverty, the intervention is worth it. There is no quantifiable value for a human life. But by remaining apathetic on the epidemic of poverty places one upon the poorest billion where a steep reduction in sickness and mortality is attainable.

# Development organizations must shift from cost-benefit analysis of aggregate community interventions to a focus not dissimilar from Western emergency rooms, where all forms of life-saving treatment are performed until patient expiration. I acknowledge the loftiness of such a sentiment, however if poverty is indeed a preventable epidemic that can be solved through aggressive (albeit costly) interventions, the mindset regarding development cost and efficiency must align with the new paradigm. Creating water systems in the desert is pricey for instance and may take years before the program is successfully implemented, but that does not make the water system any less vital to the surrounding communities, as an example. Development cannot remain in a paradigm that measures results by success rates and percentages of communal improvement, mortality and life expectancy should be the primary indicator of measuring success. But, meeting the physical needs of the poorest billion is only a fraction of the intervention necessary for eradicating poverty.

# The social minimums (White, 2021) I wish to see as societal norms include access to: minimum healthcare and emergency health services without charge, access to primary, secondary, and minimal tertiary education without charge, access to a habitat suitable home that provides protection from weather hazards, access from unwanted animal visitors, and temperature regulation to prevent overheating and freezing, adequate nutrition for all citizens based on local preferences, universally free sanitation services to minimize health hazards, minimum caloric requirements, and daily mineral/vitamin intake, water access that is free of contaminants, drinkable, and within reasonable distance from the home which does not impede on reproductive activities, minimum kW allowance for all households, free internet access that is reliable and fast for each household, a small disposable income allowance for activities entirely up to the household receiving, fair displacement compensation for land and household assets if due to climate change driven natural disasters.

# However, this comes from an ethnocentric viewpoint, and I acknowledge that some of these minimums may not apply nor be deemed relevant to many states globally. I wish to see a global consensus of universal declarations which are codified into international law, with an international legal monitoring body protecting the societal rights of everyone on this Earth.

# The idea of providing basic minimums for all citizens is not a new nor novel idea. Denis Goulet’s 1978 essay “Sufficiency for All” argues that the continual creation of newer technologies and the increasing avenues to obtain wealth in the global economy should render mass poverty unacceptable (pg. 245) Credit Suisse’s Global Wealth Report estimates at the end of 2021, the average wealth per adult on Earth reached $87,489 USD (2022), and yet this income is not even attainable by most citizen within one of the most prosperous states in existence, the United States (Shrider et. al 2021). Income inequality alone is not the causation of poverty, but redistribution may serve as the fastest immediate intervention in this plight. However, as Goulet warns, physical needs satiation must be coupled with “… full realization of human capabilities: men and women become makers of their histories, person and societal.” (Goulet, pg. 255, 1978).

# Dignity, agency, empowerment for the poorest billion to determine their life’s purpose and sustain basic human provisions from that purpose is as important as lifting the poorest billion out of poverty. Dignity is touted as a central need for all humans, that development in its current state does not necessarily provide, as development has a savior, paternalistic mentality. Livelihoods for the poorest billion are often imposed on them by circumstances, or more unfortunately, development initiatives. It is inherently unfair that the choice of livelihood is reserved for the global rich, but with provision of social minimums to sustain the basics of life, the impoverished can pursue endeavors that bring meaning to their lives, increasing their overall well-being. Who knows the artists, the poets, the architects, the scientists we have lost to mass poverty?

# The capital exists to exterminate poverty, the knowledge to target poverty exists, however, to do so would be challenging an unequal economic system whose unbridled mainstays control and gatekeep a vast portion of the global wealth, in pure David and Goliath fashion. But I am hopeful that within my lifetime or the next, there will be a redefining of global wealth focusing on preservation and social cohesion rather than extraction and individual prosperity.

# State Debt and Reparations

# How are developing states going to sustain these social minimums once development interventions end? One solution in mind, is the forgiveness of state debt and reparation payments for colonialism, slavery, and other extractive endeavors that contribute to the current global inequality and poverty dilemma. Without the burden of debt, states will have the agency to pour into their social minimum programs and internal development in lieu of continual assistance from international development organizations.

# To briefly illustrate this point, I will consider the case of Grenada, W.I. Grenada’s interest payments on their 745 million USD of public debt totals approximately 35 million USD yearly (Wilson, 2021). With a population currently of 113,000 persons and approximately 32% of its population below the poverty line (World Bank Group, 2021), the payment amount comes to nearly $1000 in potential additional services provided per impoverished person annually. The economic impact of British and French enslavement, then colonialism may be immeasurable, however modern developed state wealth and global inequality are built on the backs of these extractive institutions (Coatsworth, 2008).

# The beauty of reparations in lieu of aid is the lack of conditions often imposed on receiving states. This allows each state to determine how best to empower the impoverished communities within their borders, with cultural context in mind, a factor often left out of the discussion of development interventions. I understand the concern for corrupt spending of reparations by developed states, but the beauty of sovereignty is it is up to the peoples within the state to determine their form of governance and if corruption is allowed. When the social minimums of the impoverished are met, their focus can move on from obtaining individual subsistence to the collective well-being of their community. A starving person cares little about governance; it's only when hierarchical needs are met that they can closely follow the political climate of their state, and therefore stand up to perceived wrongdoings and bad actors.

# Collective Prosperity and Redefining Mass Consumption

# Livelihoods, even sustainable ones, are extractive by nature of the Earth’s finite resources. And development encourages the increase in extraction to sell for greater profits, to in return purchase an increase in consumption. The cycle remains in limbo, as the Earth’s resources become increasingly finite, nutrient depletion is apparent, and the world population continues to drastically increase. We must find a way to appeal to global morality, that there is a level of consumption that is sufficient for individual well-being, in order for as Goulet would surmise, “let everyone have enough” (Goulet, 1978).

# Grenada as an example again, remains a heavy spice export economy as nutmeg, cardamon, mace, bananas, and cacao remain more profitable than other agricultural productions (Grenada (GRD) Exports, Imports, and Trade Partners | OEC, n.d.). Traditional economics would encourage the targeted production of these foodstuffs, as they offer Grenada a comparative market production. But, these foods are not nutritionally dense nor calorically sustainable for the populations within the country to survive on, so in return for producing niche export goods, Grenada is forced to import staples such as grain and poultry (Grenada (GRD) Exports, Imports, and Trade Partners | OEC, n.d.). An increasing world population with a consumption mindset incentivizes Grenada to not only engage in deforestation practices, but in exchanging current arable agriculture lands for permanent cash crops.

Focusing solely on economic gains and dominance in the world markets is hurting the sustainability of Grenada’s delicate food supply chain as the Covid-19 pandemic and Ukraine/Russia war has emphasized. But shifting from a fiscal approach to wealth to one focused on well-being will also mean a shift from optimizing yields to optimizing nutritional health. I am not advocating for isolationism tactics, as Grenada has a great transition ahead before subsistence farming becomes normative, but for states to ensure their agriculture sector fulfills the needs of all domestic citizens before considerations for importing and exporting foodstuffs. This is the gateway to a collective prosperity mindset, where the economic impact on the aggregate is considered when undertaking any production and consumption decisions.

**Concluding Remarks**

While it may seem a trivial example, The Orville, a sci-fi based television show imagines a future where currency no longer exists, as foods and goods are synthesized on a needs basis, and an interplanetary alliance exists for the purchase of technology and knowledge exchanges to promote spatial peace.

A character from a non-aligned planet mentions the norm of her world being similar to current day Earth,

***“You have a job, you survive; you don’t, you starve.” (McFarlane, 2022)***

To that, her guide retorts,

***“When all of your material needs are provided for at no cost, it changes the game… See on your planet, currency is money, in the Union, it’s reputation. So, if you do something, anything that benefits our society, and you work hard at it, you’re rich. And that can be anything, from being a great scientist, a great doctor, a great chef, or a great waiter. It’s all valued.” (McFarlane, 2022)***

I utilize the example to illustrate that the ideas of this paper are neither novel, nor new, and are currently being expressed in mainstream Western media. The future I envision is not a radical one but requires a radical shift in thinking to obtain. Eradicating poverty through ensuring the basic needs of every citizen is beneficial to the global society in ways that supersede the fiscal cost of poverty reduction provisions. Treating human capital investment as triage has no societal downside; when basic needs are met, the opportunity for individuals to focus on creating contributions for the good of society through education, governance, innovation, and creativity increases exponentially. When we value all lives equally, we cannot stand for incremental poverty interventions.

Development must transition from only targeting communities where the most amount of “good” can be accomplished, to treating every viable intervention as equally good so long as poverty-driven mortality is extinguished. Globally, a Universal Declaration of Social Minimums must be established, codified, and implemented to ensure the ill physical and psychological effects of poverty is no longer allowed to hinder a drive towards social cohesion and innovation. Lastly, society must turn from a capitalistic paradigm of mass consumption towards collectivism, contentment, and sufficiency. While I remain a skeptic on humankind reaching any form of global utopia, the eradication of poverty serves as the first steppingstone in the race towards true universal unity.

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