CHRONIC POVERTY IN URBAN AREAS

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I. INTRODUCTION

FOR MANY YEARS, poverty in urban areas of Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean has been identified by spatial area (e.g. settlement, neighbourhood, inner city) as often as it has been referred to by social group (e.g. low-income women, the homeless). This has perhaps given inadequate recognition to poverty differentiation within urban poor groups or, to put it another way, it has contributed to an assumption that the poor share similar characteristics and face the same difficulties. The focus on chronic poverty that has been of growing interest in recent years is particularly relevant to our understanding of urban poverty because it recognizes differences within "the poor".

Chronic poverty is a concept that takes into account the length of time that an individual or household experiences poverty, as well as the depth of poverty. Conceptually, it challenges us to differentiate between those who are poor at any specific point in time and those who are poor over a long period of time, and between the always (chronically) poor and those for whom poverty is transitory. While in the work of the Chronic Poverty Research Centre, the suggested period for "chronic poverty" is five years, it should be recognized that such specificity is somewhat arbitrary, and other definitions have also been used.[1] As illustrated in recent papers, this often reflects the periods for which data are available. For example, Kedir and McKay[2] use three surveys (1994, 1995, 1997) in their analysis of urban Ethiopia, and suggest that the chronically poor are those who are poor in all three surveys over a four-year period. While much of the analysis has been on incomes and the period of time without adequate income, the concept can also be applied to inadequate access to basic services such as water and education.

While, conceptually, the addition of a time dimension is easy to understand, methodological approaches vary. Kedir (in this volume) explores a number of different methodologies for the study of chronic urban poverty in Ethiopia. He argues that in analyzing quantitative income and expenditure data, the use of precise differentiated price indices is significant, with different price indices producing different movements in poverty trends. (For example, in one case, an apparent reduction in poverty became an increase through the use of a different aggregate price measurement.) Hence, the use of a single set of prices, or even the use of different prices for urban and rural areas, may produce misleading indications of relative levels of poverty and the permanence (or not) of poverty. However, while such details matter with respect to specific estimates, the significance of the concept lies in the questions it raises for the analysis of poverty and poverty reduction.

A consideration of the length of time that individuals and households have incomes that fall below the poverty line (by poverty line, we mean an income level that is established as necessary to

This volume has been compiled in collaboration with the Chronic Poverty Research Centre at the University of Manchester (www.chronicpoverty.org). The papers by Begum and Sen, Kedir, and De Swardt, Puoane, Chopra and du Toit discuss research that has been partly supported by the Centre.

Many papers in previous issues of *Environment and Urbanization* have focused on better ways to understand and act to reduce urban poverty. These papers can be reviewed on the on-line database that has details of all papers published in the journal, and can be searched by keywords, city, nation or author – see http://eandu.poptel.org.uk. Two issues of the journal (Vol 7, Nos 1 and 2, 1995) were on urban poverty, and these can be accessed at no charge at http://eau.sagepub.com/. Vol 13, No 1 (2001) and Vol 17, No 1 (2005) focused on urban poverty reduction.

purchase some approximation of basic needs) leads to a more differentiated understanding of poverty. The use of a more differentiated concept challenges us to recognize differences in power, social class, income and the stability of income within broad categorizations of the poor. Perhaps because of a strong spatial focus in urban studies, there has been relatively little attention given to the permanent or temporary nature of the incidence of poverty. Hammal, Mock, Ward, Fouad, Beech and Maziak's detailed study of the situation of the poor in Aleppo, Syria, (in this issue) highlights many of the problems faced by the urban poor within such a spatial dimension. Lack of services in some informal areas and low state investment, together with high densities create a difficult and unhealthy living environment and significant health problems. The extent to which different groups face different health risks emerges in the discussion, with a consideration of the particular risks faced by children. An emphasis on chronic poverty seeks to overlay a generalized analysis with a systematic understanding of how the incidence of such problems varies within the population. Such an analysis highlights the vulnerability of specific groups and measures the differential incidence both within each time period and over time.

This volume highlights the particular circumstances of the urban poor. Two papers discuss the situation of specific groups in Bangladesh, one characterized by their position with respect to the market (i.e. rickshaw pullers) and the other by age (street children). The labour market is also the focus of Iyenda's study of informal traders in Kinshasa. Two studies consider poverty within specific low-income settlements. A study from Cape Town examines the experience of poverty for households in Greater Nyanga and Khayelitsha, with a consideration of the depth and multidimensional breadth of poverty that includes such aspects such as wage labour and other income sources, educational attainment, access to services, expenditure and food security, and health status. Henry-Lee's study of Jamaica considers the multiple ways in which "garrison" communities are excluded from (at least some of) the benefits that other citizens secure. Sabry looks in particular at those families who are included – and some who are excluded – from a state social assistance programme, locating her study within two low-income neighbourhoods in Cairo. Kedir's study of Ethiopia offers an overview of a number of studies, illustrating the extent to which different methodological approaches have been used, as well as the scale and nature of chronic urban poverty as it is described in these studies.

One of the major problems in the study of chronic poverty is the paucity of data. The lack of official data hinders an understanding of the situation experienced by specific low-income households, as discussed in several of the contributions here, and the authors have used different strategies to overcome this. In Bangladesh, Begum and Sen construct their sample to include old and young rickshaw pullers; they also consider the length of time pullers have worked in this trade, to understand the trajectory of a life of rickshaw pulling. In Jamaica, Henry-Lee compares aggregate figures that measure access to services to examine changing levels of deprivation within specific areas over time.

Once temporal issues are taken into account, a much more differentiated picture of deprivation comes to the fore, which influences much more than simply the length of time that poverty prevails. Rather than treating "the poor" as a homogenous group, the process exposes particular situations of the poor, and the specific forces associated with such situations. As earlier and more detailed analyses have shown, but as has rarely been fully acknowledged on a wider scale, the poor are highly differentiated by factors such as age, gender, educational attainment and ethnicity, and these are all important correlates with different levels and intensities of poverty. Volume 7 of *Environment and Urbanization*[3] considered a number of these aspects of urban poverty, including issues of gender and livelihood strategies/the labour market. Also important, and relevant in the context of "urban", is that the chronically poor are also spatially differentiated with, for example, different problems associated with residency in inner cities, urban peripheries and smaller towns.[4]

Such differentiation is particularly significant for an understanding of who should benefit from poverty reduction strategies. The tendency for the benefits of poverty reduction programmes to be captured by those who are better off has long been recognized, but many such programmes actually do little to address the differences between groups in securing benefits. A more differentiated approach to the categories of poverty helps to identify who gets what. It is of direct assistance, for example, in ensuring that many of the Millennium Development Goals (with their emphasis on halving the proportion of

people who suffer from hunger, or whose income is less than US$ 1 a day, or who are without safe water and basic sanitation) are not achieved simply by reaching those who are better off among the poor, leaving the poorest groups behind.

II. WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE CHRONICALLY POOR IN URBAN AREAS?

AS SHOWN BY the papers in this volume, poverty in urban areas is critically influenced by labour and commodity markets. To put it bluntly, the poor receive incomes that are too low to purchase what they need for long-term survival and advancement. This outcome reflects a lack of employment opportunities, low wages and/or low returns from informal vending or other forms of self-employment. It also reflects the extent to which, and the amount that, urban dwellers have to pay for everything, with few opportunities to secure, outside of the market, such essential goods and services as access to water, sanitation, rent for housing, transport and health care. The papers here show the (often cyclical) relationship between vulnerability to the market (i.e. dependence on finding work and affordable adequate food), low pay, lack of assets (including the inability to invest in education and manage short-term crisis), ill-health and, hence, even greater vulnerability to the market. The consequences are considerable ongoing poverty and vulnerability of the poor to sudden crises (because they have not managed to accumulate assets).

Much of the attention of development experts and development agencies has focused on rural development, and this rural focus is also evident in discussions of poverty. The focus on urban in this volume is not intended to deny the significance of rural poverty, although it seeks to redress an imbalance in concern. At the same time, it is increasingly recognized that urban and rural poverty are related in numerous ways, for example through rural-to-urban migration. As Begum and Sen explain in the context of Bangladesh, many rickshaw pullers in Dhaka were previously agricultural labourers in rural areas (i.e. among the extreme rural poor) before they moved to urban areas, seeking to improve their situation.

Both rural poverty and urban poverty have been associated with exclusion from market opportunities.[5] However, the urban poor, unable to sustain themselves except through the market, find their poverty embedded within limited employment opportunities. If they cannot find a living through their labour, they take up informal sector activities that, without capital, offer only very low returns. Far from the move to the city creating economic opportunity for the rickshaw dwellers, Begum and Sen conclude:

"Moving themselves and their families to urban areas seems only to reduce the prospects for escaping poverty in the longer run, since children are more likely to remain uneducated. This intergenerational transfer of poverty[6] can then 'reverse' during the rickshaw pullers' later life, when children who have not escaped poverty remain largely unable to support their ageing parents."

Why is this the outcome? There are many reasons. One already referred to in the context of Bangladesh, and also highlighted by De Swardt, Puoane, Chopra and du Toit in their paper on Cape Town, is the high levels of migration into cities (in the latter case from the Eastern Cape to Cape Town) and a high level of competition for jobs. In Cape Town, there is a notable lack of formal employment; the study of Khayelitsha and Greater Nyanga indicates that only 23 per cent of adults have a formal permanent job and that most of them work in the informal sector.

The authors of the papers on Kinshasa and Dhaka both emphasize the limited livelihood opportunities within the informal economy. At a time when many of the Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSPs) place considerable emphasis on the informal sector as a source of job opportunities, those researching the sector recognize that there are many problems associated with such employment. Iyenda looks at those working in the informal sector in Kinshasa, and notes that over 90 per cent of those interviewed would have preferred to work in the formal sector, largely because of greater income security and access to services (which may be attached to jobs in the city). Begum and Sen also emphasize the very real limitations faced by informally employed rickshaw pullers, and suggest that government employment strategies need to recognize the long-term health implications of this work.

Despite evidence of considerable difficulties in securing health and well-being, income levels may mean that the households discussed here do not count among the "global poor". The rickshaw pullers in Dhaka earned the equivalent of US$ 2.40 a day in 2003, above the threshold of the

US$ 2 a day poverty line and well above the US$ 1 a day that has so captured the attention of aid agencies (and which is the main "poverty line" used within the Millennium Development Goals). While more than three-quarters of households in Khayelitsha and Greater Nyanga (Cape Town) with at least one wage earner still did not earn enough to push income per adult-equivalent over a South African poverty line of R 560 per month, this income (close to US$ 2) is also above the US$ 1 a day level. However, such broad judgements may be misleading. As noted above, Kedir argues that the choice of price index used to set poverty lines is significant in measuring levels of urban poverty. The issue is elaborated on by Conticini, in his discussion of street children (in Dhaka):

"*Access to the urban informal labour market can double their income-earning capacity relative to that in rural areas. However, such a direct comparison is misleading, given the higher cost of living in urban areas …[and] because of the taxes/bribes children have to pay to mastaans (mafia members), matabbans (community leaders), the police, guards, and station and launch senior staff. Girls said they were subjected to higher taxes than boys, even when performing the same work … taxes paid by girls reached 50 to 60 per cent of their income. The boys' taxes were between 30 and 50 per cent …*"

The argument is that large numbers of urban dwellers incur significant additional expenditures, and that generalized poverty lines may be misleading. Several of the papers refer to the cost of living in urban areas. One of the book notes in this volume, reporting on a recent study of informal land delivery processes in six African Anglophone cities, concludes that land is difficult for the poor to access and, hence, that rent is now an essential expenditure for them.[7] Also relevant is the inability to accumulate assets, as in the case of the rickshaw pullers in Dhaka, who literally "use up" their labour power pulling the rickshaw, and face a difficult old age. The authors explain that per capita household expenditure, like income, declines with the duration of rickshaw pulling, and is almost 10 per cent lower among long duration pulling households than in the households of those who have recently joined the occupation.

In the context of low incomes and few assets, households are vulnerable to crises. With the lack of basic services, health crises, in particular, are common. As Begum and Sen elaborate in the case of Dhaka:

"*An extraordinarily high proportion (75 per cent) of rickshaw pullers reported having encountered at least one crisis in the last five years, with an average incidence of two major crises per household. Of these, two-thirds of the crises and almost half of the crisis-related expenses relate to health shocks.*"

A particular challenge faced by a growing number of households is that of HIV/AIDS. Kedir, and De Swardt, Puoane, Chopra and du Toit discuss the problems of these families and the difficulties that they face in securing their livelihoods.[8]

Returning to the immediacy of everyday living, without assets or sufficient income, there is evidence of considerable hunger. There is little in the studies about urban agriculture, although it is mentioned as a possible but uncommon strategy for residents of Cape Town. Given high densities in the settlements studied (and highly commercialized land markets), it is likely that, as in other major cities, there is insufficient land for domestic food production to become a significant source of nutrition for many. Several of the papers in this volume refer directly to hunger and a lack of food:

- In Greater Nyanga and Khayelitsha, "*…an average of 43 per cent of households experienced a food shortage at any given time of the year…alarmingly, more than half of all households (54 per cent) rarely or never consumed meat or eggs, 47 per cent rarely or never ate fruit, and 34 per cent rarely or never had vegetables.*"
- Conticini makes a similar comment with regard to Dhaka's street children, noting their lack of a balanced diet and the associated health risks. Despite this, he also notes that street children may eat better than those who remain with their families in urban and rural areas due to their greater control over incomes.
- Iyenda quotes a report on Kinshasa, which suggests that 31 per cent of children suffer from chronic malnutrition, and that shopping habits reflect the fact that many households only consume one meal a day.
- The risks that people are prepared to take are summarized by the following quote in Kedir, which refers to the use of sex-related activities to secure food: "*It is better to die of HIV/AIDS after 10 years than die from starvation now.*"
- Sabry, in her study of low-income settlements in Cairo, notes that residents only eat meat at Muslim feasts, when people donate meat in poor areas. She also notes that those who lack work lack food unless the family is able to borrow.

The papers make specific reference to the problems faced by those living in peripheral areas, and to the difficulties of securing employment. Even reasonable physical distances, that in some urban areas are easily travelled, become difficult obstacles in a context where there is little affordable transport – costs are simply too high relative to incomes. Sabry discusses the situation in the settlement of El-Zelzal, where transport is a major issue for residents. One of the book notes in this volume expands on this theme by highlighting the considerable costs of transport in Johannesburg for those living in informal settlements around the city.[9]

III. STATE ACTIONS: PROGRAMMES, POLICIES AND PATRONAGE

IN THE CONTEXT of the urban poor, labour and commodity market outcomes are the result of many small decisions made by businesses, employees and consumers. They are notoriously hard to influence. In this context, what should be the role of the state and, particularly, of local government? The all-too-frequent situation is that described by Henry-Lee in Jamaica: the poor support specific politicians in anticipation of actual or perceived benefits. The practice of clientelism prevails in many low-income urban settlements – the poor (nominally at least) accept their dependence on political patrons, whom they support (generally with votes) in return for favours relating to access to employment, basic services and/or other state resources. This reflects the lack of alternative means for allocating scarce resources. Henry-Lee discusses the situation in Kingston whereby political parties secure a very high concentration of votes in certain low-income communities that experience high levels of gangsterism and crime (garrison communities). The concentration of political power associated with territorial domination has significant implications for the local population, which has to live with high levels of insecurity. While poverty indicators suggest that conditions have improved over time, these areas remain disadvantaged when compared to the rest of the city. Residency in these areas makes it difficult for families to have the same opportunities as others in the city. In many other cities, there are specific areas that are stigmatized in a similar way. Indeed, in some places, those living in informal settlements have no official address, which also disqualifies them from accessing services to which they should have a right – for instance, schools for their children, subsidized basic commodities, or health care.

Even when there are specific pro-poor policy and programme responses, the shortcomings are evident. The papers on South Africa and, more specifically, Egypt, discuss the demonstrated incapacity of the state to assist the urban poor even when poverty reduction programmes are in place. In the areas surveyed within Cape Town, income grants (welfare payments to supplement incomes, such as pensions or grants for children) make a significant difference to the group earning between R 500 and R 1,000 per month. However: "*…the lowest-income group, earning less than R 500 a month, seems to have the least chance of obtaining grants (31 per cent of households)*." Sabry examines one such welfare programme in Egypt, the Social Aid and Assistance programme, demonstrating the inadequate and arbitrary nature of such programmes. For a widow with two children, the most that the grant offers is 22 per cent of the World Bank poverty line for Egypt; further studies for five typical families able to apply show that, in every case, the monies offered were considerably lower than the amounts required. Moreover, only 230,000 households are reached – considerably fewer than the number in poverty.

Government incapacity with respect to service provision is also evident in both countries. In the settlements surveyed in Cape Town, only 8 per cent of households reported having water supplies inside their homes, and 41 per cent use public taps outside their plots. Sanitation was equally lacking:

"*Only 17 per cent of households had a toilet inside the home, and the majority of households shared outside toilets. Thirty per cent of households reported difficulties in accessing a communal toilet, and 10 per cent had no access to toilets.*"

This is not to say that government policy is irrelevant. Indeed, one of the frequent earlier associations with increases in urban poverty in the 1990s was retrenchment and reduction in the number of government employees.[10] As noted by Kedir, when discussing chronic poverty in Ethiopia, this is still considered to be an important reason, according to the urban poor. But it does suggest that regardless of whether positive impacts are intended, governments face real difficulties in addressing the needs of the urban poor.

IV. THE "UNDESERVING" POOR

AS THE URBAN poor struggle to find their livelihoods within labour and commodity markets, the issue of exclusion also emerges. The negative judgements made on those living in garrison communities in Jamaica have already been noted. Similar themes emerge in a number of other papers. Conticini discusses the street children of Dhaka:

"They [mainstream society] call us kangali [destitute] and they say to us: 'What are you doing on the street? Go back home, find yourself a good job, don't dishonour your family'… But we are not kangali … we are working for a living and we also do many other good things."

Sabry explains how, in Egypt, the process of getting the documents needed to access social assistance programmes is cumbersome, challenging, lengthy, unclear, expensive and can be humiliating for the illiterate and poor, causing some people to give up. ID cards are required despite the fact that many do not have them, particularly women who are consciously denied them by families who consider that women should not have such cards. The verification of a person's entitlement to the programme can be a humiliating process. For example, deserted women will only be considered for the programme if they have been deserted for four years, and this is verified by questioning their neighbours.

Such attitudes mean that problems relating to a lack of adequate income and a lack of access to services are compounded by social disadvantage and discrimination. To a significant extent, and despite real structural constraints, the poor are blamed for their poverty and their difficulties.

V. CONCLUSION

THIS COLLECTION OF papers does little more than touch on the problems, issues and perspectives of the very poor living in towns and cities in low- and middle-income nations. This is not a critical reflection on the papers – just a recognition of the fact that, inevitably, only a few cities are represented (and fewer smaller towns), and that within the cities discussed, the situation of many groups has not been explored. What is evident is the multiple and overlapping causes of poverty – the major causes include low pay and insecurity within labour markets, a purchasing power too low to afford basic needs, including food, a lack of basic services, and (for at least some) discrimination. Equally evident is that there is very little development programming that addresses the needs of the chronically poor living in urban areas on a scale and with the diversity that is appropriate. As the world population becomes increasingly urbanized, the problems of urban poverty are likely to grow. Both Asia and Africa have around two-fifths of their populations in urban areas, and Latin America is already a predominantly urbanized region. The focus on chronic poverty highlights the fact that the poorest and most disadvantaged face significant problems in their struggle for development.

VI. FEEDBACK

FOUR PAPERS IN this issue are on the themes of previous issues of the journal. The paper by Arif Hasan is about the evictions that would result from the construction of the Lyari expressway in Karachi. But it is also about how civil society groups within Karachi mobilized not only to oppose this expressway but also to suggest alternatives. These groups also demonstrated the very high costs that constructing the expressway would bring to Karachi's economy and society (for instance, schooling would be disrupted for thousands of students). This paper describes the different groups that came together to address this issue, including those from the communities most at risk of eviction, academics and local NGOs, including the Karachi Urban Resource Centre (whose work was profiled in Vol 6, No 1, 1994).

The importance of urban agriculture to the livelihoods and food supplies of hundreds of millions of urban dwellers has been documented in many previous issues of *Environment and Urbanization*; the paper in this issue by Oumar Cissé, Ndèye Fatou Diop Gueye and Moussa Sy is of particular interest as it identifies the constraints on urban agriculture, drawing on research and city consultations in seven West African cities, and suggests the means by which they can be addressed.

Jitender Pal's review of the Urban Services Improvement Project in Cuttack (India) is of particular relevance to the theme of the April 2005 issue – meeting the Millennium Development Goals in urban areas. This paper highlights the difficulties for externally funded upgrading projects in building the local governance capacity to ensure the maintenance of project improvements.

The paper by Wael Salah Fahmi discusses the impact of the privatization of solid waste management on the *Zabaleen* garbage collectors of Cairo. As with so many privatizations, this seems to favour business interests, while threatening the interests of large sections of the local population. The paper discusses how it is possible to provide for good quality solid waste collection and management, which also contributes to poverty reduction and recycling. But to do so requires developing new channels for cooperation and partnership between the garbage collectors' association, grassroots organizations, local authorities and multinational waste management companies.

VII. *ENVIRONMENT AND URBANIZATION*'S MOVE TO SAGE PUBLICATIONS

THIS IS THE last issue of *Environment and Urbanization* that we will publish ourselves; the next issue (April 2006) on ecological urbanization will be published by Sage Publications. The reasons for this were presented in the editorial in the April 2005 issue – at their core is our belief that Sage Publications will widen the circulation of the journal and improve the management of electronic access to it.

There is no change in our policy of free subscriptions. All institutions that currently receive *Environment and Urbanization* at no charge (teaching and training institutions and NGOs in low- and middle-income nations that have difficulty affording the journal or getting foreign exchange) will continue to receive it at no charge – and we welcome other institutions in this category applying for free subscriptions.

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VIII. THEMES FOR ISSUES IN 2006 AND BEYOND

THE BULLETIN BOARD section includes details of the themes for the next few issues. These themes were chosen based on the preferences of readers who returned the questionnaire sent with the April 2005 issue or who filled in the questionnaire on our web site.

- April 2006: Ecological urbanization
- October 2006: Reducing risks from disasters in cities (including those related to climate change)
- April 2007: Finance for low-income housing and community development
- October 2007: Building good governance, including the role of civil society and social movements.

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NOTES

1. Hulme, D, K Moore and A Shepherd (2002), "Chronic poverty: meanings and analytical frameworks", Working Paper 2, Chronic Poverty Research Centre, University of Manchester, UK.

2. Kedir, A and A McKay (2005), "Chronic poverty in urban Ethiopia: panel data evidence", *International Planning Studies* Vol 10, No 1, pages 49–69.

3. *Environment and Urbanization* Vol 7, No 1 (1995): "Urban poverty: characteristics, causes and consequences"; also *Environment and Urbanization* Vol 7, No 2 (1995): "Urban poverty II: from understanding to action".

4. Mitlin, Diana (2005), "Understanding chronic poverty in urban areas", *International Planning Studies* Vol 10, No 1, pages 2–20.

5. Chronic Poverty Research Centre (2004), *The Chronic Poverty Report 2004–05*, CPRC, University of Manchester, UK.

6. Normally used to refer to the way in which parents are unable to provide adequate development opportunities for their children. Hence the "reverse" occurs when children are unable to provide for their parents.

7. Rakodi, Carole and Clement R Leduka (2005), "Informal land delivery processes and access to land for the poor: a comparative study of six African cities", Policy Brief 6, International Development Department, School of Public Policy, Birmingham, UK.

8. The April 2006 issue of *Environment and Urbanization* will have two papers on HIV/AIDS in urban areas, and their developmental impacts.

9. Community Organization Urban Resource Centre (2005), "Profiles of informal settlements within the Johannesburg metropole", COURC, Cape Town.

10. Mitlin, Diana. (2003) "The economic and social processes influencing the level and nature of chronic poverty in urban areas", Working Paper 29, Chronic Poverty Research Centre, accessed at www.chronicpoverty.org