

## POVERTY

### Challenges for The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints

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**D**espite many efforts to alleviate poverty, nearly one person in five lives on less than a dollar a day. The prevalence of poverty more than doubles when considering those who live on less than two dollars a day—the World Bank’s standard of poverty. This equates to more than 2.6 billion people living in poverty around the world.<sup>1</sup> In addition, poor countries have the highest rates of growth. These high growth rates translate into an increasing number of the world’s inhabitants experiencing poverty. While these numbers are useful in tracking poverty’s prevalence, they do little to illustrate the daily experiences of these billions of poor people—experiences wrought with lack of opportunity, hardship, humiliation, and pain. Because this high prevalence of poverty around the world is undeniable, it is imperative that we come to understand what poverty is, what problems are associated with poverty, and how we might best go about solving problems associated with poverty.

About half of the world's population lives below the World Bank standard. Poverty is much higher in Africa, somewhat lower in Asia, and lower still in Latin America. To complicate matters, population growth is most rapid in the poorest countries. Growth is below 1 percent for countries with less than 10 percent below the poverty line but more than twice as high in countries with poverty rates above 60 percent. It is not clear whether economic growth will solve the problem, because growth is often associated with rising inequality. Many are left behind in the wake of economic development. Some claim that "a rising tide lifts all boats," but recent trends in inequality and poverty suggest that a rising tide sinks some boats.

Furthermore, we cannot view poverty simply as the world's problem. Many members of the Church are in poverty, and this poverty continually creates challenges for these members. While the Church may seek to avoid the trends of the world, it is unable to escape the world's high poverty rates. Rather, the Church appears to mirror this trend. Because of the incidence of poverty among Latter-day Saints, it is crucial that Church leaders and organizations involve themselves in antipoverty work that seeks to overcome these problems.

We will first demonstrate the many problems associated with poverty. While some illustrations are provided through quantifiable data articulated by researchers, many illustrations come from the poor themselves, who are best equipped to describe the poverty situation. Second, we will reveal the poverty trends within the Church and offer possible additional problems associated with this poverty. Finally, we will look at national and local level approaches used to combat poverty. These approaches must be critically evaluated if we are to make our efforts of poverty alleviation more successful.

## PROBLEMS ASSOCIATED WITH POVERTY

### *Health*

Health is a major concern for many poor people. World Bank researchers involved in poverty assessments among the poor found that when Togolese children were asked to draw a poor person, they often drew them as ill or disabled.<sup>2</sup> If a person does not have his or her health, it is very difficult

to perform the daily responsibilities that life requires. Wagstaff et al. found that prenatal care and a doctor's assistance at the birth of children are both related to healthier newborns. Further, access to these services may help promote healthier feeding practices. Data from Bolivia illustrates important differences. Less than half of children born to the poorest mothers have access to a doctor, but about 90 percent of children in more wealthy families have access to a doctor.

### *Nutrition*

Malnutrition is a contributing factor in at least one third of deaths of children under five years of age. And not surprisingly, malnutrition disproportionately affects the poor.<sup>3</sup> In addition, the poor tend to perform worse on maternal and child nutritional statuses both within and across countries. One common standard for nutrition status is a child's height for age relative to the World Health Organization (WHO) standard. Children in Bolivia, for example, are near that standard at birth as indicated by a score of zero (zero indicates no deviation from the WHO standard). However, these same children lag behind recommended growth rates. By their second birthday, a substantial number of Bolivian children show signs of malnutrition. *Stunting* is defined as falling two standard deviations below the WHO standard. The average height for age among children in the poorest households is lower than  $-200$ . In other words, at least half of the poor children are malnourished. Children in homes that are more economically viable also fail to grow fast enough to keep with the standard, but they do much better than children in the poorest households.

### *Hunger*

Narayan and others reported that lack of food plays a fundamental role in poverty. Many poor people around the world speak of hunger when asked to define poverty. A poor ten-year-old child in Gabon explained, "When I leave for school in the mornings I don't have any breakfast. At noon, there is no lunch, in the evening I get a little supper, and that is not enough. So when I see another child eating, I watch him, and if he doesn't give me something I think that I am going to die of hunger."<sup>4</sup>

### *Access to Education*

Education is important not only because it can play a major role in getting out of poverty but also because it is associated with many other benefits, such as health, stable family relationships, and a higher quality of life. Unfortunately, children in poor households receive less schooling. As the data from Bolivia illustrates, poor children are less likely to begin school and are more likely to drop out at an early age (before age twelve).

### *Environmental Degradation*

As high focus and priority has been placed on sustainable development, it has become important to consider the relationship between the poor and the environment. Many development professionals want to blame environmental degradation on the poor, but doing so is only blaming the victim. A poor person in the Kenya Participatory Poverty Assessments remarked that “the poor live at the whim and mercy of nature.”<sup>5</sup> The poor must use their land for survival, though research indicates that they have special knowledge about the environment and are often just as concerned (if not more concerned) with sustainability as more affluent people are.<sup>6</sup>

### *Access to Clean Water*

Many of the rural poor are vulnerable because they rely on natural sources of water.<sup>7</sup> The lack of water further perpetuates the hunger problem, as food security is challenged when it does not rain. Also, it can further perpetuate the health problems of the poor as they are forced to use water that is unsanitary. When the World Bank asked children in Vietnam to define people in poverty, they frequently defined them as having no drinking water.<sup>8</sup>

The WHO and UNICEF report that in 2004, 170 million urban people and 899 million rural people were without adequate sources of drinking water.<sup>9</sup> This figure is only a slight improvement for the rural poor. In 1990, over a billion people in rural areas did not have access to water. However, the number of urban dwellers without access to clean water has increased since 1990—from 107 million to 170 million.

### *Access to Roads*

The rural poor are the least likely to have access to usable roads. Inability to access usable roads contributes to economic isolation and increased transaction costs.<sup>10</sup> In Mexico, further returns to land are greater when the village has a paved road, and overall welfare is improved through decreased transaction costs.<sup>11</sup> Researchers studying poverty in Papua New Guinea demonstrated that improving the access to usable roads in rural areas will have a direct impact on reducing poverty.<sup>12</sup>

### *Unsafe Neighborhoods*

Poverty is often associated with unsafe areas and high crime rates. While discussing poverty with the poor, Narayan et al. reported that many poor women throughout the world spoke of increased crime and the fear that comes along with it. Women in Ukraine say they “worry when their children return late from school or work.” Women in Moldova are afraid to work the night shift for fear of being assaulted. “Rapes of teenage girls, unfiled claims of child support by mothers due to fears of being beaten by the fathers, and even the crippling of a woman following a drunken argument among the couple” are all documented in case studies from South Africa.<sup>13</sup> The occurrence of crime is quite prevalent in poor areas, and this is causing great fear among the people.

### *Social Exclusion*

The poor are often excluded from the broader society and, therefore, feel humiliated and vulnerable when seeking the help of the state. A poor person in Latvia remarked that “poverty is humiliation, the sense of being dependent, and being forced to accept rudeness, insults, and indifference when we seek help.”<sup>14</sup> This creates a poverty trap—the poor are excluded from society, and because of this exclusion, they are unable to access the resources that they need. This social exclusion, both real and perceived, keeps them from being able to escape the poverty situation. While this problem may not be easy to quantify or measure, it is an important associate of poverty that should be addressed.

### *Psychological Aspects*

Poverty research and alleviation efforts have largely focused on the economic factors of poverty, along with other quantifiable measures. However, there is error in this thinking. Poverty has a strong psychological component that only the poor can articulate. While Narayan and others found that poverty is specific to a place and location, they also discovered that it is almost always associated with voicelessness and powerlessness. The poor feel unable to control their lives and have very few choices available to them. After reporting that the poor feel helpless, a poor, elderly man in Uganda stated, “It is this feeling of helplessness that is so painful, more painful than poverty itself.”<sup>15</sup>

### *Multiple Dimensions*

With the aforementioned evidence, it is easy to tell that poverty has many dimensions. Each of these dimensions interacts to create the reality of poverty. It is not enough to claim that poverty is entirely about monetary security. It has dimensions that transcend far deeper than that, and if we are to combat poverty most effectively, we would be wise to consider its many dimensions. By focusing on the multidimensionality of poverty, we have a much clearer picture of what it actually means to be poor.

## LATTER-DAY SAINT POVERTY

### *Trends*

It is important to consider Latter-day Saints’ country-level membership growth by poverty level of the country. Growth rates are especially high in countries with poverty rates above 50 percent. However, the majority of Latter-day Saints are not concentrated in the poorest countries. Most Church members live in countries with poverty rates below 20 percent, such as the United States, Canada, Japan, and most of western Europe. But the distribution is changing. The main difference in the distribution of Latter-day Saints between 1983 and 2005 is that by 2005, fewer members lived in countries with poverty levels below 20 percent, and more members

lived in countries with poverty levels between 20 percent and 50 percent. Very few members lived in countries with poverty levels above 50 percent.

It is impossible to directly calculate the changing poverty rate among Latter-day Saints because the Church does not have precise information about members' incomes. One way to estimate the impact of growth is to calculate what the Latter-day Saint poverty rate would be if Latter-day Saints had the same poverty rate as people in the country where the members reside. If we make this assumption using poverty rates after the year 2000, we come up with an estimate of 21.2 percent. If Latter-day Saints were distributed as they were in 1983 (i.e., if the proportion of Latter-day Saints living in each country had not changed since 1983), then the poverty rate would be 17.5 percent. These estimates are far lower than the world's poverty rate, and the difference between 17.5 and 21.2 is not large. Still, the implication is clear: the growth of the Church in developing countries is increasing the percentage of members exposed to the risk of poverty.

### *Challenges for Latter-day Saints*

In addition to the many previously mentioned problems associated with poverty, Latter-day Saints who are in poverty experience additional problems related to their membership in the Church. Attendance, participation, tithing, and the ability to hold and perform a calling all pose potential problems for impoverished members. Those in poverty may live long distances from the meetinghouse and have no way of getting to church. They may have no time to participate in Church activities because they are too busy working for the survival of their family. The commandment to pay tithing is likely daunting to Church members in poverty. Furthermore, as impoverished Latter-day Saints may find it difficult to hold and perform a calling, they are unable to truly integrate themselves into the institution of the Church. In order to feel a part of the group and gain identities as Latter-day Saints, these members need to serve in these capacities.

## SOLUTIONS

The challenge of dealing with poverty is compounded by the multidimensional nature of poverty described above. Poverty increases the risk of poor health, lack of education, lack of infrastructure, and so on. In turn, poor health, lack of education, lack of infrastructure, and associated problems make it more difficult to get out of poverty. The final issue we consider is whether national-level policies or locally based programs are more effective in dealing with poverty.

### *National Level*

Many antipoverty programs have been developed at the national level. These typically focus on the economic dimensions of poverty, providing cash transfers and food subsidies to the poor. They also place a large focus on infrastructure investments, such as building schools or hospitals or roads in an attempt to improve the poor's access to these kinds of services. A major benefit of national programs is they have the resources needed for these kinds of programs that they generally get through taxes, other international institutions, and outside donations.

National programs have recently started to place much emphasis on human development as a means to help the poor escape poverty. Mexico's Progresa program provides a good example of this. This program transfers money to poor households on the condition that they participate in human development activities. Mothers are given money for their children's school enrollment for attending the health clinic and taking their children there and for participating in health and nutrition learning meetings. Children are also given nutritional supplements when they go to the clinics. This kind of program is concerned with investing in the human capital of the poor in order to pull them out of the intergenerational poverty cycle.

Progresa has been heavily evaluated, and it seems to be an effective way of increasing school attendance and improving the health and nutrition among the poor.<sup>16</sup> Also, the fact that rigorous evaluation is inherent in its design is innovative and useful. Many national-level programs are not heavily evaluated and become products of the ruling official and party, only to be exchanged for a new program when someone new comes into



office. Evaluations of national programs are needed in order to make them as useful as possible.

While researchers' evaluations suggest strong benefits from participating in Progresa, the poor do not share this same view. A large drawback of national-level programs is that the poor do not view them as being effective in creating job opportunities. Interviews with poor people in northern Mexico confirm this notion. The poor are happy to have the cash from Progresa because they are always short on money to buy food and clothes for their children. But they report that these programs do not address their need for more stable, higher-paying jobs. Owing to their extreme circumstances, the poor are less concerned about the long-term benefits of better nutrition and schooling for their children. Because national programs are developed for an entire nation, they are unable to integrate elements of the local contexts into the design of the program. In addition, national-level programs are far removed from the people, and they only exacerbate the dependency and powerlessness that poor people feel. National-level programs do little to address the psychological aspects of poverty.

### *Local Level*

One alternative solution for poverty alleviation occurs at the local, grassroots level. These programs assume that the poor know their situation best, and they know what they need to improve the community's livelihood. The poor are given the responsibility to design, implement, and evaluate programs based on their self-addressed needs. Grassroots programs are developed within the local context of the poverty situation, and they integrate the many dimensions of poverty into their design. The poor share their expertise on their location and situation, and as they come to own the project, they are better able to address the psychological hardships associated with poverty (i.e., despair, powerlessness, humiliation). This process of participation of the poor throughout all program dimensions is an integral aspect of these programs. This process is both a means and an end to poverty alleviation. It is a means, as the act of sharing local knowledge builds the confidence and power of the poor people, and an end, as the knowledge they share brings new perspectives on successful poverty alleviation techniques.

Our experience in northern Mexico has allowed us to see how local development occurs. Every year, a group of students travels to northern Mexico for three weeks to witness and participate in grassroots development projects. For one of these weeks, the students camp in the Sierra Madre Mountains among the Tarahumara, the indigenous people who live there. A Mexican man named Juan Daniel is very familiar with these people; he has lived among them and has gained their trust. He acts as a bridge for them in obtaining the outside resources they need, while also encouraging development through local efforts. While there, we participate in projects that community members have developed themselves. We are not there to give development consultation to the Tarahumara but simply for the labor that we can provide.

We have helped install water piping systems on the tin roofs of homes so the people could turn the rainwater from their roofs into sanitary, usable water that was accessible right at their home. We also have helped with replanting Soltol, a plant they are dependent on for their economic well-being as they sell drinks and baskets they produce from it. We have helped them build rock retention walls to create soil beds for future planting. While the Tarahumara may need our labor efforts, they do not need us to tell them how to improve the well-being of their society. They gather together as a community to decide what projects should be done in the community, and with the help of Juan Daniel, they obtain outside resources that help put these projects into action.

While grassroots development has much to offer in terms of poverty alleviation, it is not without its challenges.<sup>17</sup> First, communities are not homogenous and should not be seen as such. It is likely that not everyone agrees on the community's needs. In addition, local leaders and authorities may capture these programs and control them, making grassroots programs look no different than national programs. Also, some type of help is needed from the outside to instigate these processes and to bring necessary resources to the community. These outside individuals or organizations play a vital role in community development. They must remember that their role is to facilitate and not to tell the community how projects should be developed or implemented. Furthermore, if these individuals know the challenges of grassroots development, they may use caution to overcome

them. For example, if an outside individual recognizes that capture by local elites may be possible, he or she should take proper caution to ensure that all the voices of the community are being heard.

## CONCLUSION

It is clear that effective antipoverty efforts are greatly needed to overcome the poverty problem that faces so many individuals around the world. And as we recognize the growing problem of poverty within the Church, we should feel even more inclined to become involved in anti-poverty work. In his evaluation of the world's progress toward the Millennium Development Goals, D. J. Shaw stated, "Overcoming poverty is not a gesture of charity. It is an act of justice. It is a fundamental human right, the right to dignity and a decent life. While poverty persists, there is no true freedom."<sup>18</sup> As members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, we need to support antipoverty efforts around the globe. We must support national programs that aim to reduce poverty and address some of the problems associated with it. In addition, we must support grassroots poverty efforts that seek to overcome poverty by addressing many of the poverty dimensions that are not addressed by national efforts.

## NOTES

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