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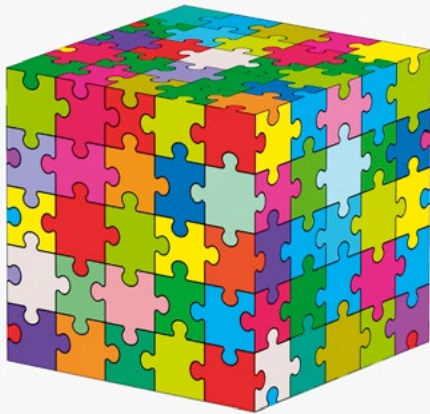
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This brief argues for a pragmatic approach to poverty, rather than an analytical one:

- Poverty is a wicked issue—complex, multidimensional, unclear and changeable. There is not one problem to be addressed. If we are not dealing with a set, specific problem, or even a defined process, there is little point in chasing after definitive, mechanistic answers.

- There are some common misunderstandings about anti-poverty policy. The first is the belief that we can prevent poverty by identifying and dealing with its causes, or the 'generative mechanisms' that lead to people being poor; this has led to a long series of bad policies. The second misconception is to suppose that if we know what causes the problems, we will know how to stop them; the way into a problem is not usually the way out of it. Neither position is tenable, and too often they have led policy astray.

- The problems are not going to sit there waiting for someone to solve them, so that they can be picked off one by one; new problems and issues are arising all the time. Poverty is dynamic—constantly shifting and changing, as an enormous range of processes coincide and collide.

- One of the central insights offered by the emphasis on poverty as a multidimensional issue has been to emphasise the importance of the perceptions, experience and voice of people who suffer it, as a way of clarifying issues and developing priorities.

POVERTY AS A WICKED PROBLEM

by Paul Spicker

Introduction

Analytical social science has consistently failed to get to grips with the problems of poverty. Many social scientists begin from a false premise: that a better understanding of poverty offers clearer and more direct answers about how to respond to it. They argue that we need "to improve the accepted meanings, measurement and explanation of poverty, paving the way for more effective policies."[1] This is a chimera. Poverty cannot be understood in this way, and in any case, this is not how effective policies are developed.

Whatever we think we know about poverty, there is always more to it. Many analyses start with income, but poverty is as much about social relationships as it is about economic ones. The fieldwork on which the *Voices of the Poor* study was based asked poor people in developing and emerging economies about what poverty meant to them.[2] The participative poverty assessments examined, not a defined problem, but the terms in which poor people themselves identified and understood the poverty they were experiencing. Poor people are affected by lack of resources, but they do not talk primarily about resources. They are concerned with material needs, ill health and precarious livelihoods, but the concerns they express say just as much, and sometimes more, about social issues, such as gender and social exclusion, or about political issues such as the lack of community organisation and relationships with authority.[3] Amartya Sen has argued that people are poor, not mainly because resources are short, but because they lack entitlements.[4]

Twenty years ago, many of the social scientists working on poverty were still confident that poverty could be clearly defined and responded to in terms of low resources. *An*

international approach to the measurement of poverty, signed by Peter Townsend and 79 of the leading academics in the field, claimed:

> Poverty is primarily an income- or resource-driven concept. It is more than having a relatively low income. … If criteria independent of income can be further developed and agreed, measures of the severity and extent of the phenomenon of poverty can be properly grounded. That will lead to better investigation of cause and more reliable choice of priorities in policy. … [5]

But poverty is linked to power and capacity as much as it is to economics. It is often said that poverty is multi-dimensional;[6] it would also be as true to say that it is 'many-headed'. The first, and in some ways the most obvious problem with a primary focus on income and resources is that it inevitably reduces the priority of other key issues, such as social relationships, the abuse of authority and exclusion. While it addresses some problems and issues, it leaves others untouched, and runs the risk of being undermined by the gaps.

Some problems are 'wicked'. They are ill-defined and unclear. They are complex: just when we think we have got hold of the problem, we find we have only got part of it. They change as things develop, refusing to stand still while they are being dealt with, so that a response that starts out looking appropriate eventually seems to miss the point. They seem to be impossible to control. Rittel and Webber identify several other characteristics of wicked problems. For example, wicked problems cannot be definitively formulated, or tied down. (Dealing with poverty is their first example)[7]. It is difficult to tell if the problem is solved, and there is no "stopping rule"—it is not possible to say when the job is done. Poverty is a moving target—or, perhaps more accurately, a whole shooting gallery of moving targets. The problems are not going to sit there waiting for someone to solve them, so that they can be picked off one by one; new problems and issues are arising all the time. Poverty is dynamic—constantly shifting and changing, as an enormous range of processes coincide and collide. One of the reasons why administrators like improving housing schemes or infrastructure is that the schemes do not disappear after they have been improved; but programmes dealing with unemployment, deprived children, families or poor communities have a way of changing the targets, personnel, relationships and people they are dealing with as they go, and that regardless of the good they do they cannot be proved to deliver lasting, long-term benefits. That does not mean they should not be implemented—but they have to be justified in their own terms, and not as a means to poverty eradication.

Some of the things that Rittel and Webber say about wicked problems are not true of poverty—for example, that it is not possible to learn by trial and error, or that every problem is unique. That does not matter much—it is in the nature of the beast that generalisations do not work too well. These understandings of poverty are inter-related, they overlap with each other, they are liable to be confused or lumped together; but they do lead in different directions, and sometimes a policy to deal with one can contradict a policy that is intended to deal with another.

False Trails and Blind Alleys

There are some common misunderstandings about anti-poverty policy. The first is the belief that we can prevent poverty by identifying and dealing with its causes, or the 'generative mechanisms' that lead to people being poor. There are huge problems in the way of doing this. In evidential terms, the available data are always uneven, sometimes inconsistent, hardly ever beyond question. Theoretically, it is virtually impossible to distinguish association from generative influence, and most of the problems are multifactorial. Methodologically, multivariate methods work by isolating the influence of different variables from the context in which they are applied—but it might well be the context that most matters. Most attempts to deal with the 'root causes' of poverty—through eugenics, education, breaking the cycle of deprivation or the culture of poverty, addressing aspects of racial disadvantage, promoting work, 'structural adjustment' and centralised economic control—have proved to be misconceived. They had to be, because complex, multidimensional issues cannot possibly be addressed through a main single focus—but in all of these cases, social scientists had convinced themselves that this time, they had 'The Answer'. Too often, social science has been worse than useless. While most of these policies were simply less effective than their proponents hoped, at least two policies in that list—eugenics and centralised economic control—proved to be dangerous and damaging, while others (such as structural adjustment or intervention in the cycle of deprivation) remain bitterly disputed. Misconceived structural explanations generally lead to policy that is irrelevant or incomplete; pathological explanations, which attribute poverty to the faults of the poor, have the potential to do great harm. Findings about poverty and poverty reduction have to be cautious and qualified.

The second misconception is to suppose that if we know what causes the problems, we will know how to stop them. That has to be wrong. If we fall into a lake, we need to be able to swim—what we know about geomorphology or fluid dynamics will do nothing to get us out. This argues for a pragmatic approach—considering what works in practice, rather than what ought to work in theory. The international organisations are keen on evaluating effects using pilots, control trials and precise data management to judge the contribution that specific approaches make. However, identifying 'what works' is not as easy as it sounds. Part of the problem is that the data are not strong

enough to support the methods, and the greater the range of problems, and the more interactions there are between them, the less possible it becomes to identify the strands. Part of the problem is 'motivated reasoning'—people see in the results what they want to see. Systematic reviews of evidence are liable to come systematically to contradictory conclusions.[8] Part is the weakness of 'predictive validity': doing the same thing twice is no guarantee of having the same effect the second time. That happens because the context and circumstance are constantly changing. The methods that are typically used for evaluation rely heavily on the idea that it is possible to isolate, or bracket off, the effects of specific variables. Pawson and Tilley are highly critical: '… what needs to be understood is what it is about given communities that will facilitate the effectiveness of a program! And that is precisely what is written out.'[9] At a broader level, predictive approaches are liable to be self-defeating. Some policies have unintended effects. Some—such as industrialisation, economic growth, or social protection—change the situation where they are being applied.

Policies for poverty

Accepting that poverty is a wicked issue—complex, multidimensional, unclear and changeable—makes it difficult to see what is an improvement, and what is not. It is often the case in development studies that while some people are passionate advocates of particular types of response—aid, microcredit, trade, and so on—others are equally passionate in rejecting them. The arguments are stronger, on both sides, because they are based on a wealth of experience in different countries: people like Sachs[10] and Easterly[11] know what they are talking about, but they take strongly contrasting positions. The difficulty for any critical reader is that, on the whole, they both make sense—they just do it in opposite directions. Many of the more effective strategies to deal with poverty—economic development, markets, trade, targeted support and so on—work in part, but they can trail further aspects of poverty in their wake. They are part of the solution, but they can just as easily be seen as part of the problem.

If we are not dealing with a set, specific problem, or even a defined process, there is little point in chasing after definitive answers. Indirect policies—policies aimed not at the conditions of poverty, but at causes, the general environment where poverty breeds, or prevention—are all likely to miss the point. Policies that deal directly with the problems of poverty stand at least some chance of responding to the problems that are in front of us. The most obvious is poor relief—actions that make poor people less poor, usually by distributing resources. Poor relief is not well liked by academic critics, but there is a lot to be said for it—sometimes people need first to be fed. Then there are pragmatic compromises, such as 'indicator targeting'—approaches where the people

who will receive help are more or less likely to be poor. This has a mixed record, because sometimes it diverts resources from other poor people. Identifying key interventions—specific policies that produce beneficial effects throughout a complex system—is more plausible, as long as we do not assume that the same keys open every box. Expanding education is important for children, but it also has implications for the economy, for women, for child care, for human development.[12] Cash transfers do more than increase income: they expand the range of people's capabilities, making new activities possible,[13] and creating new infrastructure changes communications, society, trade and the economy.[14] These are examples where the complexity of poverty, its interconnectedness with the social context, can be turned to good advantage.

Another pragmatic response is provision for contingencies, of the sort offered in social protection systems—cover for older people, for people who are sick or disabled, for unemployed people, and so on. This has often been surprisingly successful, because although it tends to leave some people out, in practice it has also helped to establish a floor for many that they will not fall below. This is sometimes represented as prevention or social investment, but that is not the main purpose. The basic reason for providing basic health care, sanitation, decent housing, gender equality, good education or child care is that people need these things now, not that it will stop them from being poor in the future. (That might still be true, but it does not make sense to count on it). Providing for contingencies reduces people's vulnerability—the extent to which, if bad things happen, they will be harmed by it. Insurance, social protection and public services are ways of doing this. And then there is universal provision, such as universal basic education or basic health care, which has also proved remarkably effective—it is one of the best ways of ensuring that people are not left behind.

Conclusion

Describing poverty as a 'wicked problem' implies that such policies are never going to work comprehensively and exhaustively, but they can address some parts of the complex tangle or inter-related issues. Responding to poverty is not a matter of solving problems: it is about trying to make things better than they were before. We do not necessarily know, and cannot even be confident, that we have identified the right problems. This could be seen as a counsel of despair, but it does not have to be. Tackling complex problems has to start somewhere. In so far as Poverty Reduction Strategies have had some success, it is not because of the 'science' behind them, but the pursuit of multiple objectives, negotiation and engagement of stakeholders. The key point, Radelet argues, "is that these country-led PRSs—as imperfect as they sometimes are— … have shifted the balance

toward countries establishing key policies and priorities themselves."[15] One of central insights offered by the emphasis on poverty as a multidimensional issue has been to emphasise the importance of the understanding, experience and voice of people who suffer it, as a way of clarifying issues and developing priorities. The more that can be done about these issues, the less bad things will be. That is as much as we can reasonably hope for.

About the Author

CROP Fellow Paul Spicker is a writer and commentator on social policy. His published work includes sixteen books, several shorter works and over 80 academic papers. After teaching at Nottingham Trent University and the University of Dundee, he held the Grampian Chair of Public Policy at Robert Gordon University (RGU) from 2001-2015, where he is now an Emeritus Professor.

Notes

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