

**POVERTY AND URBAN GOVERNANCE:  
A REVIEW OF THE FUNCTIONAL ANALYSIS OF POVERTY**

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**ABSTRACT**

*Poverty, like any other social phenomenon, can be analyzed in terms of the causes which initiate and perpetuate it, but once it exists, it can also be studied in terms of the consequences or functions which follow. This paper tries to describe important functions (or dysfunctions) of the poor, enough to support the argument that the idea of the poverty and the stigmas with which some poor people are thus labeled may persist in part because they are useful in a variety of ways to the people who are not poor. It is a functionalist perspective analyzing how poverty benefits the social system as a whole. The notion of functions (or dysfunctions) was perceived out of observable adaptive consequences from the indigent struggle to meet the economic requirements of everyday survival, providing newer treatment to the traditional concept of poverty. This analysis does not imply that poverty, undeservingness, and stigma will or should persist; whether it will persist is going to be determined by what happens to poverty in general. It further suggests how poverty can be alleviated both sociologically and physically.*

**Keywords:** *Undeserving, Unworthy, Poverty, Stereotype, Stigma, Economic, Social, Benefit(s),*

**INTRODUCTION**

As population of the developing world increases, a major challenge remains coping with poverty. Dealing with poverty is important for many reasons; large number of people cannot pay taxes or support public services without substantial level of governments funding; the very poor cannot contribute in a productive manner to the development of a pool of skilled human resources necessary to generate goods and services in the modern competitive economy (Richard 2001).

Poverty, like any other social phenomenon, can be analyzed in terms of the causes which initiate and perpetuate it but once it exists, it can also be studied in terms of the consequences or functions which follow (Herbert, 1994). These functions can be positive and negative, adaptive and destructive, depending on their nature and the people and interests effected.

Poverty has many negative functions (or dysfunctions), most for the poor themselves, but also for the non poor. Among those of most concern to both populations, perhaps the major one is that a small but visible proportion of poor people is involved in activities which threaten their physical safety, for example street crime, or which deviate from important norms claimed to be "mainstream", such as failing to work, bearing children in adolescence and out of wedlock, and being "dependent" on praise singing. Furthermore, people believe that poor people act as they do because of moral shortcomings that express themselves in lawlessness or in the rejection of mainstream norms. Like many other policy makers, urban planners or sociological planners, however, the argument is that the behavior patterns which concern the more fortunate classes are *poverty-related*; because they are and have historically been associated with poverty. After all, mugging is only practiced by the poor.

Because their criminal or disapproved behavior is ascribed to moral shortcomings, the poor people who resort to it are often classified as unworthy or undeserving. For example, even though the failure of poor young men (or women) to work may be the effect of a lack of jobs, they are frequently accused of laziness, and then judge undeserving.

Judgments of the poor as unworthy are not based on evidence, but derive from a stereotype, with a "kernel of truth" (e.g., the monopolization of street crime by the poor). One reason for the exaggeration, stereotyping and for the continued attractiveness of the concept of the undeserving poor itself, is that undeservingness has a number of positive functions for the better-off population. Some of these functions

or uses are positive for everyone who is not poor, but most are positive for only some people interest groups and institutions, ranging from moderate income to wealthy ones (Hebert,1994). Needless to say, that undeserving has uses for some people does not justify it; the existence of functions just help to explain why it persist.

### **FUNCTIONS (OR DISFUNCTIONS) OF THE UNWORTHY POOR**

The notion of function or empirical observable adaptive consequences is adapted from the classical conceptual scheme of Robert K. Merton. The analysis is concentrated on those functions which Merton conceptualized as latent, which are unrecognized and/or unintended, but the proviso that the functions which are identified as latent would perhaps not be abolished once they were widely recognized (Merton, 1949. Herbert, 1972,). This discussion is on positive functions which are further divided into specific functions, although the sets are arbitrarily chosen and interrelated.

#### **THREE POLITICAL FUNCTIONS**

***Institutional "scapegoating":*** The scape-goating of the undeserving poor extends to the institutions which mistreat them. As a result, some of the responsibility for the existence of poverty (slums, unemployment, poor schools and their like) is taking of the shoulders of elected and appointed officials who are suppose to deal with these problems. For example, to the extent that educational expert decided that the children of the poor are learning disabled or are culturally or genetically inferior in intelligence, therefore limiting the attempts to improve schools.

Furthermore, availability of institutional scapegoating both personalizes and exonerates social systems. The alleged laziness of the jobless and the anger aimed at beggars or praise singers take the heat off the failure of the economy, and the imagined derelictions of slum dwellers and the homeless, off the housing industry. In effect, the undeserving poor are blamed both for their poverty and also for their absence of "political will" among the citizenry to do anything about it.

***Conservative power shifting:*** Poverty makes one lose their political legitimacy and whatever little political influenced they had before they were stigmatized. Some cannot vote, and many do not choose to vote or mobilize because they know politicians cannot listen to their demands. Elected officials might ignore them even if they vote or mobilize because these officials and the larger polity cannot easily satisfy their demands for economic and other kinds of justice. As a result, the political system is able to pay additional attention to the demands of more affluence constituents.

***Spatial purification:*** Stigmatized populations are often used deliberately or not, to stigmatize areas in which they live, making such areas eligible for various kind of purification. As a result, 'underclass areas' can be torn down and their inhabitants moved to make room for more affluent residents or higher tax payers (Isabel Sawhill, 1989). Drug dealers and other sellers of illegal goods also find a haven in areas stigmatized as underclass area, partly because they supply and sell more in such areas, but also because police protection in such areas is usually minimal enough to allow illegal activities without significance from the law. In fact municipalities would face major economic and political obstacles to their operations without stigmatized areas in which stigmatized people and activities can be located.

One other form of job which is of paramount importance to most politicians which the undeserving poor are used for is of course political thuggery.

#### **THREE ECONOMIC FUNCTIONS**

***Economic banishment and the reserve army of labour.*** People who have successfully been labeled as undeserving can be banished from the formal labor market. For example "school dropouts", are often thought to lack the needed work habits, such as proper adherence to the work ethic, and may not be offered jobs to begin with. They are effectively banished from the labor market before entering it (Kathryn M. Neckerman and Kirschenman, 1991). Many ex-convicts are declared unemployable in similar fashion and some become recidivist because they have no other choice but to go back to their criminal occupations.

***Supply illegal goods.*** The undeserving poor who are banished from other jobs remain eligible for work in the manufacture and sale of illegal goods, including drugs. Although it is estimated that 65 percent of all illegal drugs are sold to elites and the better-off people who are not poor, the sellers are often people banished from the formal labor market. Other suppliers of illegal goods include the illegal immigrant,

considered undeserving in many communities, who work as bike riders (*Achaba*), water vendor etc, under illegal conditions.

**Job creation:** Perhaps the most important economic function of the undeserving poor today is that their mere presence creates jobs for the better off population, including professional ones. Since the undeserving poor are thought to be dangerous or improperly socialized, either their behavior has to be modified so that they act in socially approved ways, or they have to be isolated from the deserving sectors of society. The larger the number of people who are declared undeserving, the larger also the number of people needed to modify and isolate as well as control, guard, and care for them. Among these are the social workers, teachers, trainers, mentors psychiatrists, doctors and their support staffs in juvenile training centers, 'special' schools, drugs treatment centers, and penal behavior modification institutions as the police, prosecutors, defense attorneys, judges, courts officers, probation personnel and others who constitute the criminal courts and the guards and others who run the prisons.

One can argue that some of the rules supervising, controlling the undeserving poor are more effective at performing the function of creating domestic, clerical and assisting in professional jobs for the better-off population. More jobs are created in the social sciences and in journalism for conducting research about the undeserving poor and producing popular books, articles and TV documentaries for the more fortunate who want to learn about them. The job chain is also extended to the teachers and others who train those who serve, control and study the undeserving poor.

#### **TWO MICRO-SOCIAL FUNCTIONS**

**Risk reduction:** Perhaps the primary use of the idea of the undeserving poor is because it takes place at the micro-social scale of everyday life, in that, it distances the labeled from those who label them. By stigmatizing people as undeserving, labelers protect themselves from the responsibility of having to associate with them, or even to treat them like moral equals, which reduces the risk of being hurt or angered by them. Risk reduction is a way of dealing with actual or imagined threats to physical safety, for example from people who might be muggers, or cultural threats attributed to poor youngsters or normative ones imagined to come from broken homes or juvenile training centres (remind homes). All pejorative labels and stereotypes serve this function which help to explain why there are so many such labels (Myron Magnet, 1993). Charles Murray (1984) understood the essence of this ideological function when he argued in the case of welfare that state legislation for the poor only increased the number of the poor.

**Scapegoating and displacement:** By being thought undeserving, the stigmatized poor can be blame for virtually any shortcoming of everyday life which can be credibly ascribed to them - violations of the laws of logic or social causation notwithstanding. Faulting the undeserving poor can also support the desire for revenge and punishment. In a society in which punishments is reserved for legislative, judicial and penal institutions, *feelings* of revenge and punitiveness towards the undeserving poor supply at least some emotional satisfaction. Since labeling poor people undeserving opens the door for nearly unlimited scapegoating, the labeled are also available to serve what Herbert (1994) called the displacement function. Being too weak to objects, the stigmatized poor can be accused of having caused social problems which they did not actually cause and can serve as cathartic objects on which better off people can unload their own problems, as well as those of the economy, the polity or of any other institution, for the shortcoming of which the poor can be blamed.

Whether society wide changes in the works which are displaced on to "shift-lessness" or economic stagnation, the poor can be declared undeserving for what ails the more affluent.

#### **NORMATIVE FUNCTION**

**Moral legitimating:** Unworthiness justifies the category of deservingness and thus supplies moral and political legitimacy by definition, to the institutions and social structures that include the deserving and exclude the undeserving. Of these structures, the most important is undoubtedly the class hierarchy, for the existence of an undeserving class or stratum legitimates the deserving classes, if not necessarily all their class-related behavior. The alleged immorality of the undeserving also give a moral flavor to, and justification for, the class hierarchy, which may help to explain why upward mobility itself is so praiseworthy.

**Norm reinforcement:** By violating or being imagined as violating a number of mainstream behavioral patterns and values, the undeserving poor help to reaffirm and reinforce the virtues of those patterns and to do so visibly, since the violations by the undeserving are highly publicized. Norm violations and their punishment also provide an opportunity for preserving and reaffirming the norms. This is not insignificant, for norms sometimes disparaged as "mother hood" values gain new moral power when they are violated, and violators are stigmatized. If the undeserving poor can be imagined to be lazy, they help to reaffirm the protestant work ethic; if poor single-parent families are publicly condemned, polygamy and the two-parent family is once more legitimated as ideal (Isabel Sawhill, 1989).

Enforcing the norms also contributes further to preserving them in another way, for one of the standard punishments of the undeserving poor for misbehaving- as well as a standard obligation in exchange for help- is practicing the mainstream norms including those that members of the mainstream may only be preaching, and that might die out if the poor were not required to incorporate them in their behaviour. Old work rules that can no longer be enforced in the rest of the economy can be maintained in the regulations for workers. Economists like to argue that if the poor want to be deserving, they should take any kind of job, regardless of its low pay or demeaning character, reflecting a work ethic which economists themselves have never practiced (Teresa Funicello, 1993).

## **TWO MICRO-SOCIAL FUNCTIONS**

**Reproductions of stigma and the stigmatized:** For centuries now, undeservingness has given rise to policies and agencies which are set up to help the poor economically and otherwise to become better off , but which actually prevent the undeserving poor from being freed of their stigma, and which also manage unwittingly, to see to it that their children face the same obstacles in some instance, this process works so speedily that children of the stigmatized face anticipatory stigmatization; who are frequently predicted to be unable to learn to work and to remain on the right side of the law even before they have been weaned.

If this outcome were planned deliberately, one could argue that politically and culturally dominant groups are reluctant to give up an easily accessible and always available scapegoat. In actuality, however, the reproduction function results unwittingly from intended and seemingly popular practices. For example, the so-called War on drugs which has so unsuccessfully sought to keep hard drugs, but has meanwhile done little to provide drugs treatment to addicts who want it, thereby aids the continuation of addiction, street crime, and a guaranteed prison population, not to mention the various disaster that visit the facilities of addicts and help to keep them poor.

The other major source of reproducing stigma and the stigmatized is, according to Micheal B. Katz (1986) the routine activities of the organizations which service welfare recipients the homeless, and other stigmatized poor and end up mistreating them for one thing such agencies, whether they exist to supply employment to the poor or to help the homeless are almost certain to be underfunded because of the powerfulness of their clientele. No organization has ever had the funds or power to buy, build or rehabilitated housing for the homeless in sufficient number. Typically, they have been able to fund or carry out small demonstration projects.

In addition organizations which serve stigmatized people often attract less well trained and qualified staff than those with high status clients, and if the clients are deemed undeserving competence may become even less important in choosing staff (Micheal Lipsky, 1980). Then too, helping organizations generally reflect the social stratification hierarchy, which means that organizations with poor, low status clients, they frequently treat them as undeserving. If they also fear some of their clients, they may not only withhold help, but attack the clients on a preemptive strike basis. Last but not least, the agencies that serve the undeserving poor are bureaucracies which operate by rules and regulations that reutilized the work, encourage the stability and growth of the organizations and serve the need of their staffs before those of their clients when these factors are combined, as they often are and become cumulative, as they often do it should not be surprising that the organizations cut off escape routines from poverty not only for the clients, but in doing so also make sure that some of their children remain poor as well.

***Exterminations of the surplus:*** Morbidity and mortality rates remain much higher among the poor than among moderate income people. In other words, various social forces combine to do away with some of the people who have become surplus labour and are no longer needed by the economy. Several of the killing illnesses and pathologies of the poor change over time, currently, they include AIDS, tuberculosis, hypertension, as well as psychosis, substance abuse, street crime, injury and death during participation in the drug trade and other underworld activities, homicide resulting from neighborhood conflicts over turf and respect whether the poor people whose only problem is being unfairly stereotyped and stigmatized as undeserving die earlier than other poor people is not known.

Moreover, these rates can be expected to remain high or even to rise as rates of unemployment and of banishment the labour force rise especially for the least skilled. Even the better off jobless created by the downsizing as a result of the Global Economic Meltdown, blame themselves for their unemployment if they cannot eventually find new jobs, become depressed, and in some instances begin the same process of being extruded permanently from the labour market experienced by the least skilled of the jobless.

In effect, contemporary advanced capitalism may well have created the conditions. In any case, the early departure of poor people from an economy and society which do not need them is useful for those who remain. Since according to Herbert (1994), the more fortunate classes have already developed a purposive blindness to the structural causes of unemployment and to the poverty-related causes of pathology and crime that follow, those who benefit from the current job erosion and the possible extermination of the surplus labour may not admit it consciously either. Nonetheless, those left over to compete for scarce jobs other resources will have a somewhat easier time in the competition, thus assigning undeservingness a final positive function for the more fortunate members of society.

#### **FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS**

The findings in this review includes:

- The criminal and deviant behavior among the poor is largely poverty related rather than the product of free choice based on distinctive values.
- The undeservingness of the poor is an ancient stereotype, and like all stereotypes, it vastly exaggerates the actual dangers that stem from the poor.
- Poverty related deviance is not necessarily harmful just because it does not accord with mainstream norms.
- The notion of undeservingness survives in part because of the positive functions it has for the better off population and;
- The only certain way to eliminate both this notion and the functions is to eliminate poverty.

This paper tries to describe the important functions of the poor, enough to support the argument that the idea of the poverty and the stigmas with which some poor people are thus labeled may persist in part because they are useful in a variety of ways to the people who are not poor. This analysis does not imply that poverty will or should persist, whether it will persist is going to be determined by what happens to poverty in general. If it declines, poverty-related crime should also decline, and then fewer poor people will probably be described as undeserving. If poverty worsens, so will poverty-related crime as well as the stereotyping and stigmatization of the kinds and numbers of undeserving poor, if only because they make convenient and powerless scapegoats. The functions that the undeserving poor play cannot, by themselves, perpetuate either poverty or undeservingness, for as noted earlier, functions are not causes. If huge numbers of additional unskilled workers should be needed, let's say for a war against the Republic of Cameroun, as they were in America or Britain for the World War II war effort, the undeserving poor will be welcomed back into the labour force, at least temporary. Of course, institutions often try to survive once they have lost both their reasons for existence and their functions. Some of the institution and interest groups that benefits from the existence of underservingness or from controlling the undeserving poor may try to maintain undeservingness and its stigma.

#### **CONCLUSION**

Economic liberalization, structural adjustment and globalization may have improved growth prospects in some countries, but they have widened the gap between rich and the poor, and in many cases condition

for growth have worsened. Structural adjustment policies, privatization and deregulation have reduced the scope for governmental intervention more directly. Yet what governments (National, regional and local) does or does not still has a crucial impact on economic growth and on poverty, inequality and exclusion (DFID, 2001). Whilst the room for maneuver for government may be quite constrained, how they use it can have a significant impact on the poor.

### **RECOMMENDATION**

In solving the problem of the undeserving poor, two approaches are recommended namely; Sociological and physical planning perspectives.

#### **Sociological perspective**

- Whether applying the label of undeservingness to the poor should persist is a normative question which ought to be answered in the negative. Although people have a right to judge each other, that right does not extend to judging large numbers of people as a single group with one common moral fault or to stereotyping them without evidence either about their behavior or their values. Even if a case could be made for judging large cohorts of people as undeserving these judgments should be distributed up and down the socioeconomic hierarchy, requiring also to consider whether and how people in the working, middle and upper classes are undeserving.
- The same equality should extend to the punishment of crime. Today many Nigerians and courts still treat white collar and upper class criminals more leniently than poor ones. The public excuse given is that the street crime of the undeserving poor involves violence and thus injury or death but as many students of white-collar and corporate crime have pointed out these also hurt and kill people and often in larger numbers, even if they do so less directly and perhaps less violently.
- Changes also need to be made in the conception of deviance, which conflates people whose behavior is different with those whose behavior is socially harmful. Bearing children without marriage is a long standing tradition among the poor. Born of necessity rather than preference, it is poverty related practice but it is not by itself, harmful or at least not until it can be shown that either the children or the moral sensibilities of the people who oppose illegitimacy are significantly hurt. Poor single parent families are hardly desirable, but as the lack of condemnation of more affluent single parent families should suggest the major problem of such families is not the number of parents, actual or surrogate in the family, but its poverty.
- And because many of the poor are stereotyped unjustly as undeserving, scholars, writers, journalist and others should launch a systematic and public effort to deconstruct and delete legitimate notion of the undeserving poor. This effort, which is necessary to make effective antipoverty programs politically acceptable again, should place the following five ideas on the public agenda and encourage discussion as well as dissemination of available research.

#### **Physical Planning perspective**

- City Poverty Assessment (CPA) which is a tool for urban planning providing crucial and up-to-date information on what Government in Adamawa State (and also many actors in the private and voluntary sectors) needs to know when developing city policies and projects against poverty. It is intended to provide feedback to city managers of diverse topics such as city finance, city employment and growth, effectiveness of social problems, infrastructure priorities, and so on.
- Partnership with the private sector or corporate individuals should be encouraged. It is the most direct way to reducing poverty through employment and income generation. This implies promotion of economic growth in local areas. But, since the promotion does not always result in full benefits for vulnerable groups, it is necessary to work in partnership with the private or NGO sector (which can work directly with groups of the very poor) when programs are being planned.
- Gender issues: Explicit efforts should be made to integrate gender perspectives into local planning exercises. Given that women suffer disproportionately from the effects of privatization and poor provision of local services. It should be ensured that women are equally represented with men, and that women-led community micro-projects receive support from all stakeholders. After all, through participatory planning methods, women's interest can be effectively represented at all levels.

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