

## REVIEW ARTICLES

### POVERTY IN AFRICA

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The real African family is a body with three heads, one looking back into past, one following the present and one forecasting the future. Its a great unbeatable creature, which is perfectly equipped for surviving in the harshness of this world. When we read about the disasters, which Africa attracts as a flashlight does mosquitos, we wonder that there are still some people ever living. The Americans would probably be long dead. The Europeans desperat. The Russians worried. But the African family lives, like nothing would ever happen ...

Since its first publication, John Illife's pioneering book (*The African Poor: A History*. Cambridge 1987, 387 pp.) has become almost a classic, bringing to the readers probably the first comprehensive study of the African poor of this scope. Because a history of the African poor in the wider sense would be almost a history of Africa itself, this book is chiefly about the very poor. Although it was written and first published in the late 1980s, and therefore did not have a chance to reflect the changes which Africa experienced after the fall of the communist system in Eastern Europe, the facts and conclusions presented in this book still have not lost their validity and perspective and they remain of great value for those interesting either in the history of the poor or in the history and present state of Africa in general.

All the major questions about the poor which need to be asked: their identity, numbers, characteristics and location, the reasons for their poverty, what they thought and did about it and what the larger society thought and did about them, are discussed in this book very comprehensively, but not falling into mere statistics, rather, trying to give to the reader a fair, well balanced overview of the history of the poor in Africa from the precolonial period up to the present time. The leading subject is the transition in the nature of poverty, the patterns in which the structural and conjunctural poverty existed and changed during the centuries. The author challenges many myths tied to Africa, and although he faced, as any other researcher in the African history, the well-known lack of written primary sources, he succeeded in arguing in a very trustworthy way, underlining his arguments with secondary sources and conclusions based on his rich background knowledge of the topic.

From the first appearance of reports of starving Africans brought to Europe by missionaries and travellers, until today's multitude of TV pictures, nothing much changed in the everyday struggle for life of many Africans – tens of thousands are still sick, crippled or just homeless, with not much more than common survival becoming their daily job.

To find the roots and cause of the persistence of African poverty is a far more difficult and complex problem, which can hardly be definitively solved and explained here or probably at all, but I would like to focus a little bit more on one of the stones in the mosaic – a phenomenon tied to Africa for centuries – a basic unit which is built on the traditional African community – the extended family, although its role among the African societies varied greatly and its role as a universal provider of limitless generosity was and is often exaggerated.

As the main obstacle to development according to European economists, and as one of the few secure points for most Africans, the extended family explains, to some extent, and remains at the same time in the middle of the vicious circle – the recent African poverty trap.

The originally, relatively egalitarian African society is traditionally not projected for international competition and intentional production of surplus, which is the very essence and main source of wealth elsewhere.

In Africa, an individual, who has succeeded in accumulating a certain amount of capital by means of business activity, is almost immediately “found” by the less fortunate or the less “successful” members of his family, claiming their “traditional” rights to a part of his fortune.

Moreover, the first concern of the African peasant is not production, but reproduction, and he is willing to increase its production only in case of extension of his own family.

...in many parts of Africa the transition from “primitive cultivation” to “peasant cultivation”, in which the peasant produces partly for market while remaining primarily a subsistence farmer and retaining control of his own means of production, is still incomplete. Even when it is complete, the peasant mode of production retains essential features of its pre-market history. Its primary aim is family survival.<sup>1</sup>

Although concerning consumption, they experienced particular successes, all attempts of Europeans to effectively implant also their system of production into the African soil failed, maybe with the exception of the short colonial period. This was also the case with the new African leaders, installed in the former colonies by the departing colonial powers.

Peasants often remain resistant to money incentives to start or expand production for the market, the problem to which colonial governments commonly responded by compulsory production of cash crops. State attempts to stimulate increased productivity by the example of modern state farm or larger capitalist farms or the creation of village settlements have had remarkably little effect because most peasants do not accept that the state has any moral claim to control their pattern of life.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1,2</sup> D.K.Fieldhouse, *Black Africa 1945-1980*, Allen and Unwin 1986, p.130

The United Nations Regional Adviser on Social Welfare Policy and Training, Economic Commission for Africa, explained the situation in rural Africa in 1972 as follows:

"In rural Africa, the extended family and the clan assume the responsibility for all services for their members, whether social or economic. People live in closely organized groups and willingly accept communal obligations for mutual support. Individuals satisfy their need for social and economic security merely by being attached to one of these groups. The sick, the aged and children are all cared for by the extended family. In this type of community, nobody can be labelled as poor because the group usually shares what they have. There is no competition, no insecurity, no big ambitions, no unemployment and thus people are mentally healthy. Deviation or abnormal behaviour is almost absent."<sup>(3)</sup>

This view, if claiming a universal validity, is undoubtedly idealistic and does not always reflect the reality, but nevertheless, what might be worth of stressing in this report, is the notion of the absence of bigger or of primary ambition for accumulation of wealth. And if it appeared, as it did of course in some more stratified societies, the extent which it usually reached was far smaller than we could see in Europe. The African was first of all concerned with the well-being of his family, the bigger, the better, his biggest source of wealth was regarded not as the possession of money or of material property, but as the children who were securing his elderness.

The children, at the same time, were also one of the most vulnerable parts of African society. Besides the high infant mortality rates, their struggle for life was not accomplished by passing their early childhood and orphaned or abandoned children were also not unknown in Africa, although reportedly in smaller numbers than in early modern Europe:

In Adwa in 1818 Nathaniel Pearce recorded several children abandoned at rich mens doors by women who hoped to reclaim them after escaping from poverty, not always with success. By European standards, however, such children were rare and it is striking that the family poverty so prevalent in early modern Europe appears to have been absent from Ethiopia, except during famine. "Curiously with patriarchal people living in communities," a British traveller wrote during the 1890s, "a large family is a source of wealth, just the reverse to what is it in England." What worried Ethiopians was not that children were born but that so many died. A missionary who had visited Jerusalem, the earthly paradise of Ethiopian imaginations, was asked "whether it was true that children did not die there." <sup>(11)</sup>

In Ethiopia, however, the importance of the assistance of extended kinship to its members was of smaller significance, and the poor relied more on begging. The beggars were quite common in the savanna region, too, although compared to Ethiopia they were formed first of all from religious students, *griots*, the blinds and cripples. Their presence in the Muslim Africa, where almsgiving was a religious obligation, has been even "welcomed" as:

The almsgiving was also a source of social prestige, the rulers especially used voluntary alms giving to display power and win popularity. Yet good men

knew that the Koran taught that alms were best given in secret. When Caillié visited the mosque at Timbuktu disguised as a poor Muslim, "a middle-aged Moor stepped up to me gravely, and without saying a word slipped a handful of cowries into the pocket of my coussabe. He withdrew immediately, without affording me time to thank him."

More broadly, almsgiving had its reward in Paradise. "The Prophet said," the jihad leader Uthman dan Fodio reminded his followers, "The generous man is near to God, near to men, near to Paradise and far from Hell." Popular belief in northern Ivory Coast at the beginning of the 20th century held that pagans would be tormented in hell by a serpent formed from the alms they had neglected to give. (44)

As in Ethiopia the poor in Muslim Africa could also hope, for the rulers' charity, since they used to open their granaries in the bad years.

Another source of survival was described by an early British officer in Hausaland as follows:

The fact that a man can always get a handful of grain here and there is probably due to the simple charity inherent among peasant folk, but it may perhaps be also due to an instinctive feeling ...that bad times may place them, too, in a position dependent on other humanity. (35)

Differences also existed among the regions. While in Ethiopia the king's court was regarded as a place of hope in Buganda it was avoided as "a place of danger". Despite the coronation oath of the Bunyoro kingdom, which included promises of equal treatment of poor and rich, the reality was often different and as a king of Buganda was told

"The peasants are like sorghum – whoever mows it down, owns it." (60)

In neighbouring Rwanda and Burundi the situation of the poor was not much different. Although some kings such as Kigeri Rwabugiri

"is remembered in Western Rwanda as a generous king whose residence attracted the poor and needy and whose storehouse *rutsindamapfa* (conqueror of famine), was opened in time of dearth" (64),

the more common picture was less "poorfriendly":

The royal courts of Burundi are said to have burned their unused sorghum stocks at the end of each year "in making fire for the cattle". There could be no more vivid illustration of the brutality with which poverty was made overt in these kingdoms, in contrast to its concealment in less stratified societies. Rwanda and Burundi were among the worst parts of Africa in which to be poor. (64)

The early European initiatives in care of the poor could be characterized as a "byproduct" of the primary care of those taken sick on the voyage between Europe and India, as was the case of the first hospital in sub-Saharan Africa, built by the Portuguese in 1507 in Mozambique. These institutions consequently started to provide help for the local poor as well.

The first part of Africa to experience these changes was the colony founded by the Dutch East India Company at the Cape of Good Hope in 1652. However its first purpose was also care of sick seamen, with the arrival of the first Calvinist minister in 1665, four years later, it became a permanent institution for care of the poor.

The poor found in Africa were of European origin, too, especially in the Cape Town colony, and were formed mainly of

“unsuccessful settlers, immigrant labourers, and the more feckless of the Trekboers who had penetrated the interior”. (100) Their poverty surprised:

“I think I never saw white people in Africa so poor,” a missionary wrote in 1867 of Afrikaners living among the Tswana of Molepolole. (100)

and their ways of survival also included those based on family solidarity:

“The family instinct is particularly strong among the farming population” it was reported from the Transvaal in 1908 “and the aged, the infirm, and the destitute can usually obtain assistance or a home from their relatives.” (100)

One of the new elements in care of the poor brought to Africa by Europeans was also the rigorous distinguishing of deserving and undeserving poor. The treatment of poor under British rule was enacted in the New Poor Law of 1834. It distinguished deserving and underserving poor very strictly and while for the former was allowed to apply for institutional support, the latter were regarded with less leniency:

It assumed that no able-bodied person need be destitute. A further corollary was extreme parsimony in providing out-relief, which was available in the countryside only to the permanently incapacitated – “friendless people who are physically incapable of earning a living”, “sick persons with young children, widows with young children, or girls only”. (101)

The undeserving poor were forced to apply for work, ranging from

“three months hard labour to anyone wandering abroad without adequate means of support” (101)

in the vagrancy legislation of the 1860s and 1870s, to the imprisonment of those not having “a contract of Service” until he gets one in legislation from 1809, which reflected mainly the lack of labour after the abolition of the slave trade in 1807.

For the deserving poor, on the other hand, the 19th century Cape recommended self-help institutions and private charity. They were run mainly by Christian denominations.

The sharp line between the incapacitated and able-bodied was made after the secularization of charity by the French Revolution of 1789, which also affected French Senegal.

The initiatives of European missionaries, not denying their humanitarian context, were also used, if not as a primary objective, as one of the ways to help in the conversion of locals to the European churches:

Throughout the 19th century missionaries insisted that care for the poor was only a means towards the greater end of spiritual salvation. “To reach the soul,” one explained, “we must first concern ourselves with the body. (113)

In 1913, when Albert Schweitzer founded his hospital in Lambaréné, the relief of suffering was put in first place for the first time. He

“went to Lambaréné not to convert the heathen but to heal their pain”. (113)

During the colonial period, to the further impoverishment of the already poor contributed compulsory labour quotas, demanding an equivalent of five months

labour each year as in Uganda, or the tax system introduced by the French in AOF or by the British in Nigeria. These taxes fell especially heavily on the poor as most of them were levied as flat-rate taxes ignoring the differences in earnings. Destruction of trans-Saharan trade by the introduction of railways deprived many people of the West African savanna of their traditional occupations, forcing them to look for work in the colonial towns, and making them migrant workers and unskilled labourers. Their departure often harmed the local agricultural societies as in upper Senegal where they were leaving irrigation-based economies to decay.

But nevertheless, the towns provided opportunities lacking or unknown in rural areas, offering the chance to earn cash money and last but not least, the access to wage-labour in the urban areas remained important in preventing starvation. Moreover, labour migration was not only a case of the poor but of members of wealthier families as well. The migrant labour, however,

was a means of survival open only to the able bodied. As in South Africa, the poorest were often those who could not migrate. As a missionary in Katanga complained, "The boys go off, even the girls follow and the cripples remain to cripple the town." (151)

Money, whether in order to be able to pay taxes or just because of its rarity, contributed to the real "cash hunger":

For poor villagers money had a rarity value far above its face value. In the remote Mbulu area of German East Africa in 1906 "a rupee was placed on a stone in the house for fear that it might sink into the ground". As late as the 1950s Rwandan peasants spoke of "buying money" with labour or produce. "Peasants will walk for three days to sell an item for a profit of 100 francs," an anthropologist wrote from Niger, "because walking *costs* them nothing."

The search for money was met partly by its rapid circulation and partly by borrowing, which in turn meant selling much of the harvest to repay debts and then repurchasing food later at higher prices and on credit. In East African villages most borrowing seems to have taken place among neighbours and without interest charges, but in West Africa it was often at very high interest rates which expressed not only the difficulty of securing repayment but also the extreme scarcity of cash. (154)

The situation of the poor in the independent Africa could also be characterized briefly as the fight of increasing population for the decreasing food supply.

The reasons for growing structural poverty probably lay on two planes. At the deeper level, postcolonial Africa struggled – not entirely unsuccessfully – with the demographic expansion which had begun between the wars. In the early 1980s sub-Saharan Africa's population grew at about 3 per cent a year. In no other continent was the birth rate still rising or population growth outpacing food supply. Moreover, because Africa's population was young, its growth rates would take long to decelerate. Most Africans still regarded population growth as desirable.(232)

The rapid impoverishment was also greatly helped by the governments of independent African states. The devastating policies of the new African rulers – support-

ing loss making state enterprises and farms, a nightmare-working corrupted state bureaucracy, exploiting the peasants by low purchase prices for their products, and the privatization of the state in fact, led to disastrous results in GNP, astronomic growth of foreign indebtedness and general disillusionment, disappointment and hopelessness of common Africans

"We are tired of being developed" (233), a village elder in Shaba declared in 1975.

The first years of Independence saw very rapid urban growth, especially of capital cities.

"Kinshasa's population increased from 380,000 to 800,000 during Zaire's first three tumultuous years of Independence." (240)

This rapid influx was of course not easy to absorb. Although there were bold new housing building plans in the vast majority of countries, in fact they did not meet the numbers needed and also the bulk of new immigrants could hardly them afford as even the cheapest housing units were generally too expensive for the poor. The most common solution was the "informal" or "squatter" housing on the outskirts of the cities and growth of zones,

"which respectable residents feared to enter". (241)

The residential of "rich" and poor inhabitants were, however, only rarely segregated:

In Lagos rich and poor live side by side, in the same crowded quarters. In one house, for instance, the head of one household made about six thousand a year, and another seven pounds a month: a casual visitor would not have recognised which was which. (180)

In South Africa, those Black Africans, being subject of the rehousing plans of the government, were absorbed into the newly built settlements such as Soweto in Johannesburg or Crossroads in Cape Town, although these relocations had varied success:

An observer likened the rebuilding of Cape Town to "a man with a stick breaking spiderwebs in a forest". The webs were the networks of kinship and neighbourhood which helped the urban poor to survive. Yet webs could be re-woven. Both ideologically and in practice they were a precious inheritance. "Reciprocity and sharing is the basic principle underlying neighbour relations," a researcher reported of Grahamstown in 1978, "and the community claims that nobody goes hungry as long as someone has food." Any woman there who refused to lend and borrow in a neighbourly manner was dismissed as "too much of the "English"". (263)

These settlements also served as a first place to come for the newcomers from the countryside coming first to their relatives, although they were not infinitely generous and their reception was sometimes cold.

Unemployed men often complained that they were treated more as servants than kinsmen, while Ghanaian workers stated in the 1970s that prosperous relatives showed much hostility when approached.

"Friends and relatives come expensive," they said in Abidjan, where the poor led narrow and isolated lives. (181)

Apart from the shift to informal housing, the deteriorating independent African economies with a dramatic drop of real earnings in the towns, also caused the rise of informal occupations.

Besides the older ones such as hawking and petty trade, new ones emerged, for example in photography, electrical work, but chiefly in repair – furniture, vehicles, domestic appliances and “recycling” of all sorts of dump materials.

Although many economists urged its encouragement, the African governments saw it less kindly, the informal activities were often restricted or absolutely prohibited under fine or imprisonment, therefore depriving the “entrepreneurs” and their dependants of one of the very few sources of livelihood.

This policy, however, led chiefly to the growth of crime, organized gangs and prostitution,

The care of the structural poor, like the poor themselves, changed only within narrow limits. The family remained their first defence. That Africans cared for their own was a matter of faith and pride, an area of moral superiority over developed nations. Concern for the extended family, the aged, and the infirm was an essential component of Zambian Humanism. Occasionally a westernised politician like Tom Mboya might bewail “the undesirable situation in which a member of a family whose income increases is suddenly and constantly besieged by demands for support from a large number of distant relatives”. Few were so brash. The new elite as a whole admitted its burdensome obligations. (245)

The family care varied and did not always meet the needs of those in need, whether it was just a case of being unable to afford it or the consequence of “erosive inroads” when

the more prosperous used state or church welfare programmes to shield themselves from “the chronic drain of the hungry families”. (245)

The institutionalized care of orphans and the aged, founded mainly during the colonial era started to be regarded by the new African leaders as a “confession of moral failure”, “foreign to our traditional society” and should be replaced by the “rededication to the sacred traditional values of the extended family” (246), but in practice these challenges were often hard to introduce, as:

due to factors such as urbanisation, childlessness and certain cultural taboos connected with ageing, there will always be some aged person for whom the only mode of care will be in an institution. (246)

The hard times also came to the undeserving poor such as the beggars who were regarded as “parasites and symbols of backwardness”, “a great social evil, which should not be allowed to thrive in any healthy society” (248),

and were forced to move as in Ghana, to special centres most frequently built far from the city centres. This attitude was, however, more common in the countries without a longer tradition of begging and charity, and less present for example in northern Muslim countries with the Islamic tradition of both.

The dramatic rise of conjunctural poverty after independence was caused mainly by two factors. First represented the emergence of refugees during the civil wars. Those who survived weeks or months on the road with very little or

no food settled most commonly in the peripheral rural areas and became the poorest of the poor. (252)

The second reason for the return of mass famine mortality was drought. They also hit Africa earlier, but those between 1968 and 1985 were certainly the worst of the century. The famines they caused could be less disastrous without the:

“breakdown of the devices by which Africans had traditionally averted or survived it. In Hausaland, for example, it was claimed that complex households had disintegrated, local granaries had disappeared, collective institutions had atrophied...” (254)

The distribution of relief from European charity organizations was facing two major obstacles. One was its mismanagement inside countries by the governments or in some cases refusing of international aid from national pride reasons, while attempting to establish their own self-help programmes, the other – very bad or absent road networks, where those living in the remote areas were rarely if ever reached by relief trucks. However, differences existed among the countries:

Rwanda’s disaster of 1928 was due in part to the fact that although food existed in certain regions of the country, there were only nine motor vehicles in all Ruanda-Urundi in 1927. (158)

In Southern Rhodesia, on the contrary, despite the four serious droughts in the first three decades of 20th century, when any of them might have caused numerous deaths, none did in fact, because:

indigenous survival techniques were supplemented by an efficient administration which gave early warning of famine, provided medical protection against epidemics, and organised the supply of grain, using the railway and European traders with wagons drawn by oxen, mules, or donkeys. It was because Southern Rhodesia was more intensively governed than other colonies and had better trade and transport systems that it controlled famine mortality relatively early. (159)

There was commuting, moreover, also to quite paradoxical situations, as during the Nigerian Civil war when:

At some places, even in the war-affected areas, some surpluses of, for instance, beans, maize and rice were available, which the farmers could not sell, in spite of being surrounded by starving refugees who had no money to pay for it. (257)

The food scarcity and its critical underproduction in Africa was to some extent also due to the new economic policies, based on Riccardo’s comparative advantages theory, which were since their colonization adopted in the vast majority of African countries. This brought to Africa massive introduction of cash crop growing, to a large extent replacing the selfproduction of food grain, which according to Riccardo’s theory, should be bought cheaper on the international markets with the earnings from the cash crop exports.

This theory, however, assumed an ideal situation on the advanced item production side and on the “buying the rest” side. In Africa it worked less satisfactorily.

Probably the worst period in the previous century came in the 1970s when especially bad droughts were combined with the drop of world commodity prices, resulting in massive famines and a further rise of conjunctural poverty.

The combination of an economy oriented towards export of commodities with keeping of families with many children is one of the principal causes of the ever faster widening of the gap between the demand for food and its supply. Today it is one of the main contributors to probably the biggest problem and threat for the future of Africa – the continuous and increasing rise of population pressure on limited natural resources. The land scarcity problem, which was previously almost absent and did not produce any substantial cause of poverty, is becoming more and more obvious, resulting in serious environmental damage, with desertification, deforestation and erosion of arable land as its most visible effects.

But nevertheless, despite its population growth, there is still no reason why Africa could not be self-sufficient in food production, or at least in the short-term perspective. A country like the DR of Congo for example, possesses such a potential of fertile soil that it could become a granary for a big portion of southern Africa. But it is not, and instead, even the people of Kinshasa's agglomeration are dependent on foreign food aid.

As mentioned earlier in this article, it is a whole array of factors involved in the issue of poverty and underproduction in Africa, why they still persist and why they seem so hard to solve. To some extent it is undoubtedly a matter of the extended family, which is extremely unfavourable for economic development and capital accumulation, but other wider characteristics are at least equally important in this respect. They could perhaps be described as the everyday life philosophy of common Africans, including lack of bigger concern about the future, fatalism, massive reliance on outside aid etc. If some of them could work in the precolonial period relatively well or without bigger harmful effects on the society, in the recent globalized "turbosociety" they are a serious burden for any advancement in Africa.

Africa nowadays, when speaking about its potential for self-sufficiency, whether in food production or any other area basically, is first of all a continent of unutilized opportunities. To a large extent, of course, it is the responsibility of the postcolonial leaders and state bureaucracies, who plundered and ruined many African economies, but what may be even more important in this respect is the fact that Africa in general lacks any public administrative culture – one of the most important assumptions for effective working or for the working of any recent bureaucratic state.

In Africa, a public official can be within several years a multi-millionaire. It is no wonder that while others can only ask themselves where did he take that money, they are still turning towards the West asking for aid. This is, however, far from being a hook which can pull Africa out of poverty and isolation. On the contrary, this foreign aid creates rather an artificial environment in these countries. If people live from what they did not produce, and there is no prospect of it stopping, when there is no state policy which would terminate it, such

a country has very doubtful prospects for become potentially independent or prosperous. A majority of international aid is coming to these countries as loans anyway, the debts are accumulating, and the money only rarely reach the people it should. It is to some extent undoubtedly the fault of the donors who almost never ask what has been done with their money or do not mind, knowing their money were not used for the goal intended. Recent European philanthropy and generosity towards Africa, not denying its relief context (however short term and territorially limited) is therefore only helping to conserve the status quo, and perpetually postponing some real or to-the-core-going solution of the persisting poverty or famines.

Africa receives an ever bigger share of international aid every year. While twenty years ago it was 17 %, today is it twice as much, but still without any substantial effect or marks of improvement. In the 1970s some countries like Nigeria had thought that with oil they would automatically join the rich-countries' club. Fortunately, today, there are already countries, which dared and managed to admit that it is first of all their productivity, which is too low, they realized that rich natural resources alone will not bounce them from the bottom, but only if they are considered no more than as a starting point within a higher productivity need.

The good news about Africa is a new Africa – young African rebellion, young businessmen, unsatisfied with the state of continent and not willing to keep accusing anymore, as their fathers and grandfathers used to, the North, the World Bank, colonialism, simply everybody except Africa itself.

They feel shame to see Africa with all its potential and wealth still turning toward the West asking for alms, they are ashamed of economies built on foreign aid, they realize that responsibility is in their own hands and the past cannot serve any longer as a universal excuse for the failures of the present. They understood that they are the people who will have to accept fully the responsibility for the future of their continent, and to show for the first time that Africa is able to take its own place among the regions of the world.

They realize that to get rid of poverty takes time, but they are patient and they can wait, they know that changes are coming, that they have started and they are spreading all over the continent.