SECOND CARNEGIE INQUIRY INTO POVERTY
AND DEVELOPMENT IN SOUTHERN AFRICA

Poverty: the moral challenge
Get up and walk.
by
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The second "development decade" has come to a close. We are in the fourth year of the 1980s. What is the state of the poor in today's world compared to two decades ago? A recently published report states soberly: "There is overwhelming evidence to conclude that the plight of the poor has deteriorated, their suffering become more acute than ever before and their number increased considerably during the last two decades. Today's poor suffer not only from worsening poverty. They are also subjected to increasing deprivation, exploitation and marginalisation. The poor of our time are also the oppressed in our societies."  

Indeed, reports from concerned agencies, whether of the United Nations or governments make grim reading. The failure of our world to move towards what the World Council of Churches calls a "just, sustainable, participatory society", is becoming painfully evident. In a real sense, the "new economic order" is not even on the agenda any more. "Development" has not brought the results that so many have hoped for. Many attribute the poverty in the "Third World"countries to the fact that the slow process of development had not reached them. In fact we are discovering that the opposite is the case. The large majority of the poor people in the third world are those who have been drawn into the development process or what is commonly called "modernization" and have been impoverished by it.  

The economic system that prevails in most third world countries creates poverty and locks the poor in a state of deteriorating poverty. The introduction of modern technology and new modes of production has made traditional skills and methods of production obsolete and redundant. The political structure and processes that operate in third world societies create marginalization. The impact of the dominant western culture and values has changed fundamentally the indigenous culture and values. The poor of today are those who have lost or are fast losing much of what they have, their pride, their identity and their dignity. What we are seeing today is not a static state of poverty but the growing misery of the poor.
Inasmuch as South Africa is a microcosm of the world at large, and it is, the situation in this country is not much different. The Theron Report, published a few years ago, speaks of more than 60% of the so-called "coloured community" who live in a state of "chronic poverty". For the vast majority of our nation the situation is even worse. Right through this week, papers to be presented to this conference and the results of expert studies, will highlight the truth of this statement. The most simple of statistics make this clear. E.g. The Household Subsistance Level for an African family of six for four selected areas are as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Area</th>
<th>Subsistence Level</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cape Town</td>
<td>R257.27 per month</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>King Williamstown</td>
<td>R240.20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bloemfontein</td>
<td>R254.74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pretoria</td>
<td>R247.94</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The average earnings for Africans for 1981, however, amounted to R2,738 while real earnings amounted to R1,336. This means that both in terms of average and real earnings most Africans are living well below the Household Subsistance Level. It is no wonder then, that the vast majority of our people in this country live in conditions of permanent misery and degradation caused by poverty.

Slowly we have come to learn that poverty is not accidental. Neither must the cause of poverty be sought in some theological explanation about the "will of God", as the churches for so long have taught our people to believe. It is not true to say that some people are rich because they have been especially blessed by God. It is this kind of myth which provides the cloak of innocence under which the exploitation and humiliation of the poor can continue unabated. It is our duty to shatter these myths and to expose the lies which keep them alive.

We shall have to expose the relationship between poverty and exploitation, and poverty and powerlessness. For the powerlessness of the poor is the precondition for the continued dominance of the rich. We must expose the relationship between poverty and wealth. The poor are so poor because the rich are so rich. The process of accumulation of surplus, augmentation of wealth and the law of the market prevailing in many countries including
our own, create and sustain wealth for the wealthy and poverty for the poor.

There is a direct relationship between the poverty of the masses of people and the value system upon which our modern society is built. There is something wrong with a society which takes away the necessities from the many to give luxuries to the few. There is something wrong with a society which takes away the necessities from the many to give luxuries to the few. There is something wrong with a society in which things acquire a higher value than human beings. There is something wrong with a society in which so much more is spent on weapons of mass destruction than on feeding the hungry and the education of children. If the world had spent one million dollars a year since the birth of Jesus Christ up till today, we would have spent only half the amount Mr Reagan wants to spend on "defence" in the next five years: 1.5 trillion dollars.

Poverty is a moral challenge!

But in this country we must go further and expose the relationship between poverty and racialism which is still the heart-beat of South African society. It is not by accident that 35 out of every 1,000 black children die in this country. They die of hunger, malnutrition and because of inadequate medical treatment. But they die of these things in a country which is one of the richest on this continent and whilst the white population is the recipient of every privilege modern Western society has to offer. The desperate conditions of black people in the homelands, the broken families and the destruction of human relationships, the erosion of human dignity and the perpetuation of political powerlessness - all this is not accidental, but by design: it is the logical outcome of deliberate policy.

It is the result of deliberate policy that whites, 17% of the population, receive more than 70% of all income, while 98.1% of all income from property is accrued to whites. This must make palpably clear that poverty in this country has to do with apartheid, with white greed, with black political powerlessness. This does not mean that the problem can be solved by "making the free market more accessible" to certain selected groups from the black
community. I do not believe that the creation of a black capitalist class will solve the problem of mass poverty in South Africa because it will not mean fundamental change in the inequitable system which capitalism is. And besides: are inequalities based on class any more acceptable than inequalities based on race? Or to borrow from the title of a now famous book amongst Christians: are rich black Christians in an age of hunger any more acceptable than rich white Christians?

So the moral challenge of poverty is a challenge to ask fundamental questions about the relationships at work in our society, and it is a challenge to commitment for the sake of economics that will be more responsible to the needs of people.

II

The report of the Carnegie Commission on the "Poor White Problem in South Africa" of 1932 makes interesting reading. I would like to mention just a few of these findings and recommendations and look at them from our point of view.

One of the very first findings paves the way for tackling this problem at all levels of life and in all sectors of our society. It reads: "The problem of the poor whites should not be treated as an isolated phenomenon, but rather as the acute manifestation of influences and conditions generally prevalent in our social structure." This meant that poverty could only be combatted when a massive effort was launched to change economic, political and social power structures, and to make them responsive to the needs and aspirations of the poor. This is exactly what we have argued above. Without such a comprehensive approach to the problem of poverty, our remedies will remain at the level of emergency aid and charity, and the heart of the matter will remain untouched and unchanged.

Finding no. 50 reads as follows: "The burdens of an unsettled, roving life or of an isolated pioneer existence in the past fell too heavily upon the mother of the family for her to be equal to all the customary duties and functions of a mother, and as a result successive generations of mothers became steadily less capable of equipping their children with a normal home and social training...."
One is amazed that people who saw so well what an "unsettled life" can do to a family and how that becomes an "important cause of social...deterioration" can continue with the policy of influx control that has caused and is causing so much more devastation than their "unsettled life" ever knew. What Francis Wilson wrote about this system now more than ten years ago, remains just as true today:

This system can, and does, compel old people living amongst their friends and relatives in familiar surroundings where they have spent their entire working lives to endure resettlement in some distant place where they feel they have been cast off to die. This system can, and does, force a man who wants to build a home with his wife and children to live instead for all his working life in "bachelor" barracks, so far away from his loved ones that he sees them only briefly once a year, and his children grow up without his influence, regarding him as a stranger. One may close one's mind to these facts; one may dismiss them as being isolated casualties for the sake of a greater goal; but the harsh reality is that there are hundreds of thousands of people in South Africa who are cruelly affected in these ways.7

The very people who 52 years ago have complained so bitterly about the detrimental effects of an "unsettled life" have since been responsible for the uprooting of over three million black South Africans from where they were living, dumping them in "resettlement camps". Probably over a million more have been forced to abandon their families in poverty-stricken homelands and rural areas in order to move illegally to the towns and cities searching for some means of survival. The government controls family housing in order to enforce influx control, with the result that people are forced to live in townships built on the edge of homeland borders and commute to the white cities every day. In this way commuters from Kwa Ndebele leave home at 3 a.m. in order to get to work in Pretoria on time. They get home at 9 or 10 o'clock each night.

Less than six months ago the government passed yet another law which makes it impossible for even more families to live together in the towns and cities. The Orderly Movement Bill, due to go through parliament in 1984,
will make all of this very much worse. All talk about poverty in South Africa today which does not take this situation seriously, will be meaningless and empty.

Already 52 years ago South Africans heard the findings of the Commission on housing. It stated that "in many ways poor housing has a detrimental effect on the orderliness, refinement and morality of family life". It expressed its concern that "many of the dwellings inhabited by poor whites clearly show a low standard of living......unsuitable for civilised life." Why then, should black people tolerate the likes of Crossroads, or the sub-standard housing of the urban townships, or for that matter, the "new black cities", like Khayelitsha. If these issues were as clear then as the Commission perceived them to have been, then there is no excuse for the continuation of conditions such as these today. If South Africa had been a poor country, this would have been different. But we are not poor. We do not lack the economic resources. Neither do we lack the knowledge or understanding. We simply lack the political will to afford black people the same basic human rights which white people in this country seem to expect as their birthright.

III

One cannot help but notice the important role played by the white Dutch Reformed Church in the Carnegie Commission on poverty. It was very much part of the initiative, it helped to define a new relationship with the state in coping with the problem of poverty, and in the process it defined a new role for itself as agent for change in society.

The Dutch Reformed Church began to seriously redefine its own thinking on the question of social justice.
"In the past," ds J R Albertyn wrote, "the church has aimed too exclusively at preparing its people for the life hereafter, and has therefore bestowed too little attention on the amelioration of present conditions. It taught the poor to resign themselves to want and poverty, in the hope of better conditions hereafter, instead of actively assisting them to a better and higher life here." 10.

In pursuing this new goal, the Church would not only be responding to the desperate social conditions in which its people found themselves. It would also be responding to the message and demands of the Gospel:

Christ consistently looked upon human life as a synthetic whole, and interested himself equally in the amelioration of conditions of pain and misery and in preaching the gospel of the Kingdom of Heaven. How is it possible to expect people to live as happy Christians under conditions of hopeless misery, privation and sickness? 11.

How, indeed? But this same church expects precisely that of black people today. Even more, this church persistently denies that apartheid, even though the evidence is abundantly clear, is responsible for the deprivation, misery and poverty in which millions of black people are forced to live. No, they write to the Moderamen of the N G Sendingkerk, apartheid is executed according to the principles of love and justice, and is therefore not in conflict with the demands of the Word of God.

During this time, the Dutch Reformed Church required a remarkable sensitivity for the plight of the poor and the oppressed.

"There are many problems, but the point above all which should appeal to our Christian humanity and sense of justice is the fact that the poor white has no court of appeal... he is exploited, but has no refuge... he must put up with starvation wages... he realizes that he is unwelcome in his own fatherland. This country is his only home... Is it a wonder then that such people sink to despair? The wonder is that they do not resort to desperate deeds..." 12.
The Church concludes: "The working classes should be made to feel that in the church they have a champion for justice and mercy." Such is the language of the D.R. Church in 1932. Several years later, Rev. C B Brink would put the matter even clearer:

"The aim of the church is to bring about social justice. Justice must be done to the poor and the oppressed. And if the present system does not serve this purpose, the public conscience must demand another. If the church does not exert herself for justice in society and be prepared to serve as the champion of the cause of the poor, others will do it. The poor have the right to say: I do not ask for your charity: I demand the opportunity to live a life of human dignity."14.

When today the South African Council of Churches speaks as the voice of the voiceless, the true champion of the poor and oppressed in South Africa today; when it challenges the South African government on the blatant injustices of apartheid; when it speaks out on resettlement and removals of people, on detention without trial and bannings; when it engages in acts of genuine solidarity with the poor of our land, it is accused of subversion and communism. The government cannot stop trying to discredit the SACC and the white D R Church sings merrily along in this hopelessly discordant choir.

Time and again, the report quotes the famous words of Dr D F Malan from 1923: "If the church wishes to say to the paralyzed poor white: 'Your sins are forgiven', it must also be prepared to tell him: 'Rise up and walk'".15.

This was a challenge which the Dutch Reformed church took seriously. Not only in 1932 in its collaboration with the Carnegie Commission on Poverty; not only in taking the initiative for the Volkskongres of 1934 and the even more important one of 1947 where the blue-print for apartheid was finally discussed; but also in the preparation of the Afrikaner for the unconditional acceptance of apartheid, the church policy, as a policy for the state.
In the words of D. P. Botha: "...When (the Nationalist) Party came to power in the 1948 the DRC's struggle to sell its missionary policy to the unresponsive governments of Hertzog and Smuts came to an end. The all-embracing, soteriologically loaded apartheid policy—conceived and devised by the DR Church—had been taken over by the National Party and proved a winner in the 1948 election." 16.

The problem of poverty cannot be properly tackled without political power. That is the main difference between the situation in the 1930s with regard to the poor white problem and today, regarding the problem of black poverty. Unlike whites, black people have been denied, are still being denied all meaningful political participation. We have no share in the democratic processes of government through whose channels of decisionmaking so much must happen if this problem is going to be straightened out. So for the moment, this must remain as the major unresolved issue in the struggle against poverty in South Africa's black communities. And yet, if this issue is not satisfactorily resolved, the problem shall not merely remain unsolved, but shall jeopardize the whole future of South Africa.

But we too, have heard the challenge of D. F. Malan. Through the work and witness of individual churches, but especially through the work and witness of the SACC, this is exactly what we are trying to say to South Africa's suffering and oppressed people: "Rise up and walk!" We must do this by doing what we can to show our compassion and solidarity. We must do this by assuring the poor that it is true: the God of the Bible is the God of the poor and the oppressed. He is on their side, He has taken upon Himself their plight and their suffering. This means that the church realizes that the state of poverty and oppression is not only irreconcilable with the gospel but also unnecessary. That conditions of poverty are not metaphysical or God-given, but structural and historically explicable. In other words, poverty is a consequence of human exploitation and economic and political injustice.

What the poor need most, therefore, is not more charity or emergency aid, but a qualitatively different society. This is what we must work for. And the church must do that, knowing that this is precisely the call of the gospel.
The white DR Church may be embarrassed about it, but over the years this insight has been affirmed over and over again by Reformed theology. One of the greatest Reformed theologians, Karl Barth, said this:

The human righteousness required by God and established in obedience - the righteousness which according to Amos 5:24 should pour down as a mighty stream - has necessarily the character of a vindication of right in favour of the threatened innocent, the oppressed poor, widows, orphans and aliens. For this reason, in the relations and events in the life of his people, God always takes his stand unconditionally and passionately on this side and on this side alone: against the lofty and on behalf of the lowly; against those who already enjoy privilege and rights and on behalf of those who are denied and deprived of it. 17.

But the Calvinists of South Africa are more the spiritual children of the Dutchman Abraham Kuyper than of Barth. But long before Barth it was Kuyper who already in 1891 made clear where Reformed theology ought to stand where these issues are concerned.

...Both the Christ (says Kuyper) and his apostles after Him, as much as the prophets before Him, invariably took sides against those who were powerful and living in luxury, and for the suffering and oppressed. 18.

It is not the will of God, argued Kuyper, that one should drudge hard and yet have no bread for himself and for his family. And still less has God willed that any man with hands to work and a will to work should suffer hunger or be reduced to the beggar's staff just because there is no work. And even then Kuyper went far beyond the mealy-mouthed Calvinists who think that charity which thrives on the continued dependance of the poor can ever become the substitute of justice:

This one thing is necessary if a social question is to exist for you: that you realise the untenability of the present situation, and that you realise this untenability to be not of incidental causes, but one involving the very basis of our social association. For one who does not acknowledge this and who thinks that the evil can be exorcised
through an increase in piety, through friendlier treatment or kindlier charity, there exist possibly a religious question and possibly a philanthropic question, but not a social question. This does not exist for you until you exercise an architectonic critique of human society itself and hence desire and think possible a different arrangement of the social structure. 19.

Of course Kuyper is right. For us this calls for clear political action. For the exploitation of the poor is directly linked to the unacceptable policies of a government that is not just, not representative and therefore not legitimate. To "get up and walk" means for us no less than what it meant for the Afrikaner to whom D F Malan spoke, and that is to work for the day political, social and economic change shall become a reality, so that all of South Africa's people, including the poor, shall be able to live as human beings as God had intended for them to live.
FOOTNOTES

1. Towards a Church of the Poor, ed. Julio de Santa Ana, WCC Lausanne, 1929, xiv
2. ibid. xv
6. ibid, xvi
7. F. Wilson, Migrant Labour
8. The Poor White Problem, Vol. V, xviii
9. ibid.
10. ibid, 58
11. ibid, 59
12. ibid
13. ibid
14. Quoted by D.P. Botha, "Church and Kingdom in South Africa", in M. Nash (ed), ibid, 78
15. The Poor White Problem, Vol. V, 67
16. D.P. Botha, in M. Nash (ed), 79
18. Quoted in N. Wolterstorff, Until Justice and Peace Embrace, Grand Rapids, 1983, 73
19. ibid, 81