



Re-configuring Poverty: The Wickedness Perspective[★]

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Abstract

Alleviating poverty in small-scale fisheries requires a clear understanding of what poverty means. On the whole, different perspectives and strategies have been used to understand and address poverty. These strategies have been grounded in an understanding of poverty as a straightforward economic problem. Moreover, a number of these strategies and perspectives have one way or another been grounded in the understanding that poverty has to do with low incomes and expenditure. However in reality, poverty presents itself as a more complex problem. This paper, therefore, explores an understanding of poverty that goes beyond the income-expenditure nexus. Based on empirical information from Lake Victoria Tanzania, the paper discusses two issues, first, that poverty should be understood from an ecological, social and institutional context and secondly, that poverty alleviation involves a dilemma and a wicked problem.

Key words: Poverty, small-scale fisheries, poverty, wicked problems, happiness, value pluralism, Lake Victoria

Introduction

Poverty is multifaceted and multidisciplinary (Béné, 2003; Hulme and Toye, 2006) but incomes and expenditure have been used with increasing precision as the measure of global poverty. Fundamentally, these perspectives dominate research and leading institutions that focus on poverty, such as the World Bank and the IMF (Maxwell, 2001; FAO, 2005; Hulme and Toye, 2006). Incomes and expenditure have provided a simple categorization of people into one of three groups: poor, middle-class, or rich and governments of poor countries have been drawn into the income-expenditure paradigm as a fundamental way of thinking about poverty (URT, 2005; Research and analysis Working group, 2005; Rwanda, 2007).

The problem of poverty reaches way beyond just incomes and expenditure, a reality that has gained more recognition in recent years and changed the perspectives of several global institutions. For instance, the United Nations Development Program identifies poverty with the lack of opportunities and choices most basic to human development will lead to a healthy and creative life where people can enjoy a decent standard of living, freedom, dignity, respect, and self-respect (UNDP, 1997). The

***Paper presented to the Lake Victoria Stakeholder's Conference, Kampala, 27-30 October 2008**

Organization of Economic Cooperation Development recognizes poverty as encompassing different dimensions of deprivation that relate to human needs, among them food consumption and food security, health, education, rights, voice, security, dignity, and decent work (OECD, 2001). The International Labour Organization (ILO) perceives poverty as a basic needs issue; UNICEF perceives it as a rights-based issue; and *Medicins du Monde* of France (MDM) perceives it as a social exclusion issue. Additionally, some authors have argued that poverty is a gender (Agarwal, 1985), environmental (Leach, Mearns & Scoones, 1995) or livelihoods and human development issue (UNDP, 2000). These diverse interpretations illustrate the point that poverty is a complex concept and daunting problem.

The complexity of the poverty problem is evident in certain societies, such as small-scale fishing communities, which utilise marine or freshwater natural resources of high value that generate incomes above the poverty line (1.25 US\$ per day) and provide employment and food to the people in these communities (FAO, 2005). A deeper analysis reveals, however, that these people remain among the poorest and most vulnerable sections of the population. The problem, therefore, is to understand the reasons behind this reality and what poverty means in such communities. That is, if incomes alone cannot be used to understand poverty among small-scale fishers then poverty must be analyzed from a different angle. Why are

people poor in a situation when they have natural resources that can potentially provide a decent standard of living? This paper aims to move the discussion beyond the income-expenditure nexus and provide a broader perspective on poverty. It begins by examining how images (Kooiman *et al.*, 2005) have shaped understanding of the poverty problem and notes that people writing about poverty were influenced by those images. Indeed, the understanding of poverty seems to have been influenced by what was going on in the so-called developed nations where the poor could be readily identified by measures such as income, employment and or work, exclusion, and dependency, among others. But in some underdeveloped nations, especially at the community level, these measures of poverty have different meanings and identification of the poor remains problematic; in these nations, poverty alleviation presents itself as a dilemma which can best be thought of as a “wicked problem” (Rittel and Webber, 1973; Jentoft and Chuenpagdee, 2009). Using data from the Lake Victoria fisheries in Tanzania, this paper explores the wicked problem perspective, and argues that income does not provide an adequate measure of poverty in the fishing communities around the lake. In this case, the poverty problem begs for a re-configured analysis and solution and the discussion of poverty alleviation should not be focused on simplification and a universal application of the definition of problem.

Understanding poverty

The need to alleviate poverty, which has long been a concern among scholars, policy-makers, governments, and others, depends on a clear understanding of what poverty is. Those responsible for dealing with it must first have a clear understanding of what they are dealing with, which is easier said than done, especially when it comes to problems as complex as poverty. Poverty has been of concern since the nineteenth century (Katz, 1990; Hyatt, 2001) but understanding it has been challenging. Discussions of what poverty is and its causes have been largely shaped by the images dominating at different periods of time and the ways people involved in the poverty problem debate have been influenced by them.

This paper does not provide a chronology of when these images appeared but focuses on how some of them have shaped the understanding of poverty. Such images are built on ideas such as liberalism, free markets, the welfare state, progressive reform, structural adjustment programs, and empowerment, among others. As a consequence, two distinct lines of argument can be drawn in the understanding of poverty. First, there was the argument that the poor were themselves responsible for their “pathological habits and lifeways” (Hyatt 2001), a line of thinking that led to what Lewis (1963) called the “culture of poverty”. The second line of argument contested this notion and argued that the poor were led into such a life by external factors and therefore poverty alleviation required intervention by the government or some other external agent (Hyatt 2001).

The individualistic perspective

The argument that the poor are responsible for their lifeways is based in liberalism which has become a radical

ideology since the 17th century. The ideology of liberalism was intended to create self-reliant, “free” individuals (individual liberty) released from the grip of traditional political constraints. Liberalism, with its origin in both Europe and North America, was founded on the belief that individuals possessed a natural rationality and inclination for self-governance. This focus on self-reliance expected that social progress would manifest itself in a higher form of morality in individuals who practiced unselfishness and goodwill, as opposed to competitiveness and self-interest, and the poor would be morally rehabilitated into sober, law abiding, socially responsible, and self-reliant citizens (Bracking, 2005).

Lewis’s “culture of poverty” appears to accept this fundamental principle of liberalism. Indeed, when writing about peasants in a Mexican city and the Negroes of the United States, he appears to have been convinced that “one of the most disabling features of poverty was the predominance of a social or anti-social behaviour” (Hyatt 2001). To him, the poor demonstrated behaviours and attitudes that assured a continuation of their poverty or, in other words, they remained poor because of their adaptations to the burdens of poverty (Lewis 1998).

This presented the poor as having a distinct culture in their way of life but Katz (1990) argued that this culture did not focus on the poor as such, but rather categorized them as belonging to “a class of people whose behaviours and values converted their poverty into an enclosed and self-perpetuating world of dependence”. This culture, as it appeared, “could persist even without the immediate deprivations caused by modernization, class and race” (O’Connor, 2002). The poor were, therefore, considered to be free individuals who chose how to live their lives, independent of any outside influence. In this way they were held responsible for their poor condition and way of life.

By focusing the study of poverty on the poor themselves, rather than the systems that created conditions of poverty, social researchers developed an interest in understanding the culture of the lower class. In fact, the debate on lower-class culture reflected in the post-World War II attitude to human rights now enshrined in a new global order greatly influenced thinking in the social sciences about the poor. The distinctions were observed in the following: the political economy of affluence, which led to the notion of America becoming a classless society with a small group of the poor; post-war institutionalisation of behavioural sciences which encouraged the psychological emphasis in research on class and race; the resurgence of the middle-class and the rise of poverty as a global political issue (O’Connor, 2002). These changes disturbed social scientists of the time, including Oscar Lewis, who introduced the idea of the culture of poverty into their thinking. These arguments led some anthropologists to conclude that he took the view that the poor were responsible for their own predicament and deficiencies but ethnographers contested this perspective (Hyatt 2001).

The structural perspective

Arguing against the notion that poor societies presented themselves as having low levels of social

organization, some social scientists believed that they actually had a very complex social organization (Hyatt 2001). This conclusion was based on studies of a number of groups (which they considered poor) such as “street corner men” (Anderson, 1976, Hannerz, 1969, Suttles, 1968 and Whyte, 1943 quoted by Hyatt 2001), gangs (Keiser 1969 cited by Hyatt 2001) and the role of extended kinship and friendship networks among women (Aschenbrenner 1975; Stack 1974; Susser 1982, 1986, 1988 quoted by Hyatt 2001). The complex social systems found among these poor groups indicated that they were not victims of their own deficiencies and the cause and sustenance of their poverty was thought to be externally driven. It was argued that government programmes of providing aid to the poor stripped them of their abilities and capacities for self-reliance, leaving them incapable of taking responsibility for their actions (Hyatt 2001).

To these social scientists, government welfare programs such as the Action Program and Model Cities Program in the United States of America that guaranteed direct assistance and cash benefits to the poor left them dependent and were not truly helpful in addressing the poverty problem (O’Connor, 2002). They argued that poverty alleviation required social programmes that encouraged self-reliance, managerial and entrepreneurial skills, and an environment that fostered dependence on innate abilities rather than government support (Hyatt 2001).

Another view of government interference can be seen in its establishing an environment for vibrant institutions, specifically in the institutionalisation of the world economy, which has shaped societies and lives more deeply and radically than people realized. Barth (1997) argued that the world economy had become institutionalised to such an extent that anthropologists would find it difficult to use anthropological insights to analyse any situation. He gave an example from the Lake Victoria fisheries which, at the time of writing, was an economic success story as far as the Nile perch export fishery was concerned, but this economic success was not matched when it came to the welfare of the lakeside populations. His argument was that the pursuit of an ‘economistic’ idea of progress and development by the governments around the lake led to poverty among the local populations through eliminating life-sustaining practices, arrangements and balances.

This perspective approached poverty from the assumption that poverty is reduced as incomes and expenditure rise. This proved not the case in the Lake Victoria fisheries where there was increasing poverty together with increasing wealth which meant that the government’s role in the globalised Nile perch market had the effect of perpetuating poverty rather than reducing it (Barth 1997).

External interference can also be seen through the advocacy of empowerment, which revolves around creating room for the less privileged in society (the poor) to have a voice in decision-making that affects their lives. A notable theme in these efforts is the idea that the poor have not been organised because they are unable to organise themselves so they have to be assisted in doing so. In some instances, empowerment has been

implemented through management regimes or mechanisms that do not take local conditions into consideration (Onyango and Jentoft, 2007). Examples of empowerment mechanisms in fisheries include,—co-management regimes, community-based management, precautionary approaches to ecosystem management, and the concept of Marine Protected Areas.

Some level of assistance could be given to these poor populations (taking into account the nestedness of social relations and interdependence within the society), but they are not devoid of abilities or capabilities and probably have many skills that are not obvious. One problem is that opinion leaders may be driving perceptions of the poor; society is made to think they are helpless and hopeless people who must be shown how to get out of their poverty and that they are simply lacking in everything they need to accomplish this. Whether this is true or not may vary from one place to another but experience with Lake Victoria fishers, suggests that this is not the case. Indeed, fishers here have great abilities and capabilities, many of which they may not be aware of themselves. These capabilities can be referred to as invisible presences, or those abilities that poor fishers have taken for granted such as co-operation, respect, wisdom, education, trust and competition.

The resulting poverty notion

Based on these two perspectives, poverty has been understood in a certain way focused on the individual, which is what eventually led to a culture of poverty that saw poverty as an individual condition needing individual reform. The poverty problem therefore has a multifaceted dimension (Henderson, 1971; Jensen, 2000) which includes things like: (a) infection by chronic treatable diseases; (b) saving money to buy items only to find that the price increased while doing so; (c) looking old when one is actually very young; (d) the problem of insects in food and on the body; (e) an inability to keep food fresh or to maintain personal hygiene; (f) an inability to obtain proper education or health; (g) a pessimistic view of life and a dream of obtaining money.

Thus poverty is a deficit with poor people being deprived of life’s basic needs; it is a broken relationship that leads to exclusion, fear that makes one vulnerable, and misused power that leads to exclusion, an induced inability that increases a deficit, powerlessness and lack of freedom. Additionally, poverty is a problem of inequality, unemployment, low wages, labour exploitation, and political disfranchisement and has no single cause or explanation.

It could be argued that poverty results from structural weaknesses or failures in the governance system; the so-called interactive governance coined by Kooiman *et al.* (2005). This view emphasises that an integrated, communicative, and politically informed approach is needed if societal problems such as poverty are to be addressed (Jentoft *et al.*, 2007). Since poverty is complex, multidimensional and multidisciplinary it requires the participation of public and private stakeholders. This participation should be realised through a strong and a vibrant relations of interactive governance components—system-to-be-governed, governing system and governing

interactions. In the absence of such a relationship governability of societal problems such as poverty may be low (Jentoft *et al.*, 2007).

Poverty in Lake Victoria, Tanzania: mixture of individualistic and structural

This investigation of poverty around Lake Victoria was carried out in Chabula village of Magu district, in Mwanza region, Tanzania. It is among the 124 villages in the district and a fishing village along the shore of lake, with a population of 5,399 people (Magu District Council, District Development Plan 2008/09, unpublished report), most of whom live by fishing and agriculture forms. The study was specifically based at Nyakasenge beach, one of the beaches in Chabula village, located 7 km from the Mwanza-Musoma road at Nyangunge trading centre.

Driving towards the beach from the main road, one is humbled by what meets the eye: old and run-down grass thatched houses, a people highly dependent on rain for their agricultural activities, people walking or using bicycles, women carried on a bicycle's backseat or they themselves cycling, no electricity and no running water, children walking barefoot, girls and women carrying pails to fetch water, sometimes from the small ponds that form after rains have fallen, young boys or men herding cattle, shades made of grass which protecting sugarcane sellers by the roadside, and moving shops – individuals carrying clothes for sale known locally as *machinga*.

On reaching the beach, one notices the houses, almost all of unburnt soil or mud; the houses are very low and one cannot easily distinguish between a shop and a residence. Fishing activities take place on the beach, women are busy sorting and selling dagaa (*Rastrineobola argentea*), men who have been fishing through the night work on their long lines, some sleep under shades, others sit and chat, or play cards, pool or checkers. Some young children help to fetch water, while others play, there is very loud music, and fish trucks wait by the beach for fish to be taken to the processing factory.

My research assistants and I interviewed women and men fish traders, fishermen, crew members, and gear and boat owners, supervisors of agents collecting fish for the processors. Our interviews focused on who is poor or what poverty is in this village, among other topics and although I and one of my research assistants had interacted with this community over ten years of working around Lake Victoria, we lived with them for over six weeks and participated in a number of their daily activities for this particular study.

Our question and subsequent discussion on what poverty is taught us how people in the community thought and acted and what their values, norms and customs were. We found that poverty could not be reduced to an individual phenomenon but rather that the individual reflected his or her community and that the community was the sum of its individuals. Our respondents suggested that a poor person could not do anything, could not use his head, hands or legs to do anything, was a disabled person; was someone with less than four cows and a plough, has a grass thatched house which is leaking and he cannot get the grass to repair it because there was none in the surroundings, a person who cannot confront an

emergency, for example, if they were called to go somewhere 100km or so away and lacks the means to leave immediately if necessary. We examined the perception of disability more closely because of the fact that our image of poverty, based on incomes dependency, and exclusion among other factors, was far from what we heard and observed in the village.

We came to understand the disability point of view from the case a young boy we will call “Jed” who appeared to be more than ten years old and came from a nearby village. Both of his parents had died, but his father had been a fish trader and was known among the people with whom we interacted. Jed went to school in his village and claimed to have reached standard three (Grade 3) but could not write his name, the letter B, or the number 100 which he wrote as 11 while the number 11 was written as 01. It was clear that either he had not reached standard three, as he claimed, or he had forgotten what he learnt in school. He claimed that he left school because there was no one to buy him a school uniform and shoes. His father died before his mother but his father had many wives and his mother died long before the woman he came to know as his mother. This stepmother did not provide him with the requirements for school after his father died. Jed had lived in Nyakasenge for more than one and a half years although he stayed on the nearby Shoka Island for three months. On the island he watched young boys washing boats in between fishing trips so he decided to start washing them himself. He did this but also fished using a single hook and line known locally as *Ndoano*. He lived with a fisherwoman on the island who welcomed him, on the condition that he washed her boats. He moved between the island and Nyakasenge, but finally decided to settle at Nyakasenge to avoid a crocodile that had been killing *Ndoano* fishers. [They are vulnerable to crocodiles here because they fish from rocks that are in the middle of water some distance from the beach.]

As we were interviewing him, a boat landed and he ran to compete with other boys of his age for a chance to wash it. We discovered that there were over ten young boys like him involved in this activity but the group he belonged to called themselves the G7. Boat activity is an activity that has attracted other boys from the village who come to the beach after school. Our interview went on for another day and part of his group joined him for the discussion. They revealed that for each boat they wash, they get either one piece of fish or 500 Tanzanian shillings (equivalent to USD 0.39). Washing at least two to three boats was guaranteed on days that fishermen went fishing and on a lucky day a boy can wash up to five boats earning him well over 1 USD per day. Some of the boys doing this had become breadwinners back home with the fish they earn being taken home for the day's meal. On the face of it Jed was an outright poverty case, but in this community he was viewed as a hardworking boy who used his hands, legs and head to make a living. He was not disabled and therefore the community did not consider him to be poor and although he had few material possessions, he was not dependent on anybody for his daily needs. Indeed, he was self-employed and earned a living doing work that the community considered essential to the fishing activities. His security rested not only on his

individual capabilities but also on the community and his relations he has with others, which given his young age, was essential for his well-being in the short as well as in the long run.

One striking observation we made concerned mealtimes; if we were interviewing someone, or just near somebody's house at mealtimes, we would be welcomed in to eat with them. We found it difficult to agree because each time we thought that they had prepared just enough food for themselves but later learnt that this was not the case. In this community, they have a tradition in which, people expect you to join them for meals when you find them eating. In any case you refuse to eat with them, and then they would be disappointed; others may even consider you an enemy. In this manner the community ensured that everybody, including those who could not afford food, got to eat and access to food only required one to have legs and hands. It was a moral obligation for those who had food to accept an additional mouth at their table and it was wrong to refuse food, even if satisfied. Although this practice has now diminished, the principle behind it, that is "being your brother's keeper," is still cherished. No one will be allowed to go hungry, have nowhere to sleep, or no clothes to wear, for lack of money; in this situation, the community shares what little they have.

Our interview with Jed, together with his G7, concluded with a question about what they want to be in the future. Four of the G7 hoped to be *kupanda dolo*, crew members on fishing boats, one wanted to become the president while two wanted to join either the police or armed forces. We learnt that Jed did not have a place to call home and he slept anywhere he could find a space, but mostly on the driver's seats in the fish trucks that parked at the beach. At times, he would stay at the local place until it closed down at around four or five in the morning. He planned to go and find his father's home someday, but he did not know when. Jed's case made us inquire more closely into the lives of the crew members and discovered that a number of them came from either broken families, or they were children who ran away from home to avoid responsibilities or to reduce their burden on their parents, or simply to look for opportunities to enable them to support their parents and siblings. Jed, therefore, was on his way to becoming a crew member who represented a significant category of fishers.

We discussed Jed's case with the local leadership, who knew him and his situation; they informed us that he had a stepfather and relatives who knew exactly what he was doing and no one had ever reported his case to the village government office to take action. In their view, all was well with Jed until such time that his case was reported and it seemed that there was no concern about his situation because he has relatives who should care for him. Moreover, he was well integrated into the community and was experiencing no problems with them. That he had relatives to care for him does not constitute dependency, but is simply a case of fulfilling social responsibilities. Dependency, in this case, is not what Fraser and Gordon (1994) allude to as being a matter of gaining one's livelihood by either involuntarily working for someone, or by relying on charity or welfare for

support. According to this community, the fact that Jed can make a living without becoming a thief, beggar or deviant, implies that he is not poor, not excluded from livelihood opportunities, and not helpless, hopeless, passive, incapacitated, desolate or unemployed. Jed has strengths, he can use his hands, legs and head and he is part of a community that knows and supports him.

A further discussion of Jed's case with the community leaders led us to conclude that in this region poverty is an issue concerning responsibility and care for relatives and members of the community. Thus, Jed needs to be taken care of by his remaining relatives or members of the community where he lives. Another form of responsibility is evident in parents transferring their responsibilities to their children, regardless of the child's age and regardless of whether parents cannot look after themselves. Poverty is not just an issue of going without food or housing when you can eat or find a place to sleep from relatives or other members of the village and, indeed, individual life in this village is embedded in their community. Life in the community is defined in terms of the various activities that it carries out and life is not complete so long as your neighbours and relatives do not have their basic needs. What one possesses is valuable only so long as it is useful to others too. Thus, individuals like Jed live lives that reflect community values; the washing of boats, for instance, is part and parcel of this community and whoever is involved in it is fulfilling a community need. Thus, understanding the community means understanding poverty, and issues such as dependency, inequality, wealth distribution, work and income will be better understood if viewed from a community perspective.

This led me to question my preconceived ideas of what poverty is and the longer we lived there, the more we could see inclusion, rather than exclusion. We saw social cohesion, rather than marginalisation and we did not see deprivation, helplessness, hopelessness, passiveness, inability, and despair. Was the conventional image of poverty, based on incomes, *the* standard measure of poverty? Relying only on this image (poverty as we know it) may be inappropriate for developing strategies for poverty alleviation in this area. We concluded, therefore, that understanding poverty should not only be based on individual and or structural perspectives independently, but should encompass a mixture of both as was the case in this village. Most of all, we need to regard poverty in relation to governance because poverty as a reflection of governance failure is a systemic, not isolated, issue. This also has implications for poverty alleviation strategies since poor people are not "outliers" in the community who need special treatment and care. Poverty involves the whole community and an individual's life simply reflects the nature of the community.

Poverty clearly needs to be understood through a different branch of sociological theory that can shed light on the existing conflicts of values such as persistent child labour in a country that has signed child protection conventions, or young boys under eighteen years taking responsibilities as breadwinners, despite the reality that their parents do not have any disabilities or health problems, even though this may be against the law. The

theory of value pluralism seems relevant in this context. The idea behind the theory is that there are several values which may be equally correct and fundamental—for instance being a nun and being a mother—and yet in conflict with each other. In addition, the theory postulates that in many cases, such incompatible values may be incommensurable, in the sense that there is no objective ordering of them in terms of importance. Among Jed’s community leaders, there seem to be no prioritization of national and local community obligations with regards to child labour. Whereas the local community obligations should be achieved through the stipulated national laws, this is not the case with child labour in this community. Child labour is a practice that local community does not seem to have problems with. There is nothing wrong by having it as law at the national level similarly there is nothing wrong with talking against it at the local community level. However there is a conflict when it is practiced. This theory therefore helps in understanding decision-making when faced with a value conflict. It argues that in such a situation, decisions will be greatly influenced by the need for accountability that strengthens or weakens three observational trade-off reasoning: the desire to conserve cognitive effort; to protect self-esteem; and to avoid blame (Tetlock *et al.*, 1996). In other words, there is a need to understand how Jed’s community leaders will make decisions and act with accountability towards their community as well as national and international obligations.

Rethinking the poverty problem

The dilemma

The questions - what is a problem and is poverty a problem? - seem to be simple ones but, without being clear about it, we may not be able to see poverty as a problem. According to Rittel and Webber (1973) a problem can be conceptualized as an obstacle that makes it difficult to achieve a desired goal, objective or purpose, or a situation, condition, or issue that is unresolved. In a broad sense, a problem exists when one becomes aware of a significant difference between what actually exists and what is desired and one can do little if anything to change the existing situation into the desired one. The word “problem,” from the Greek word *próblema*, means that something has been presented to be solved which implies that something is a problem if it can be solved. But are all problems solvable and can there be problems without solutions or whose solutions are never an end in themselves? When a problem presents itself, there is either a known solution (which means there is no problem) or there is not. But if the solution is not known, then you also do not have a problem because you do not know what the problem is, because by definition a problem must be solvable.

This is the first dilemma. In the case of Lake Victoria, is poverty really not being able to use your hands, legs and head? Is poverty really a disability? If it is, then the solution would be to deal with disability and then we would have eradicated poverty from the lake region. But poverty is still prevalent in this region, meaning that the disability argument is either insufficient and we do not know what poverty is or we simply cannot deal with

disability because it has no solution. One can also know the solution to a problem without being able to implement it, but one should not overlook the important part, which is how to arrive at the solution. It is one thing to know what the problem is, but solving it is another. The second dilemma arises with regard to the need to change, which involves three things: the present situation which one needs to move out of, the state of affairs that one wants to be in, and how to move between the two states (Figure 1). Which of these states of being, the current state of affairs or the desired state constitutes a higher level of satisfaction? Why would one not prefer the *status quo*? Or do both states yield the same level of satisfaction? It is important to note that being aware of one’s condition is important in understanding a problem as it might be easier at times to know where one wants to be rather than where one is. Moving or changing may not necessarily bring about much change in one’s level of satisfaction because these states of being are determined by a fundamental issue—happiness, used here to mean evidence of a good life or well-being. Philosophers and religions have defined happiness in terms of living a good life; to Aristotle, for instance, happiness is the only emotion that humans desire for its own sake. Wealth, honour, or health is not sought for its own sake but in order to be happy.

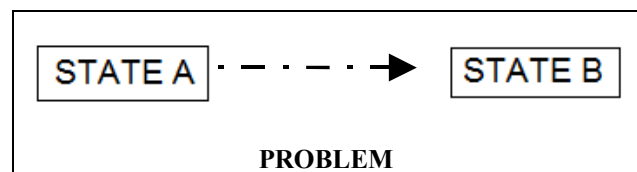


Figure 1: Diagrammatic conceptualisation of a problem

Happiness, then, is the same wherever one might be but differences come about because of differences in what leads one to the state of happiness, i.e. happiness is brought about by different things in different areas. As Rojas (2005) puts it: “A person’s judgment about her happiness is contingent on her conceptual referent for a happy life”. A relevant question to ask, therefore, is what constitutes or brings about happiness? Does happiness necessarily involve material or social possession? The answer to this question depends on several things, including social, economic, and some may even argue, biological factors (Veenhoven, 1991; Kenny, 2005; Rojas, 2005; Böhnke, 2008; Ball and Chernova, 2008). Kingdom and Knight (2007), reviewing literature from generally advanced economies, concluded that in these economies “happiness increases with absolute income, *ceteris paribus*, but not proportionately and at a diminishing rate”. Echoing this point, Heady *et al.* (2008) argue from their research in Australia, Britain, Germany, Hungary and The Netherlands that, contrary to the previous belief about the relationship between money and happiness, they found that happiness was considerably affected by income. But happiness is found equally in poor countries where incomes are low and living conditions are difficult among certain unfortunate groups (Veenhoven, 1991; Easterlin, 1995). In other words, income can either make one happy or not, depending on the circumstances.

Jed and his G7 group and crew (who could represent a larger group) on Lake Victoria, neither complain about what they do nor about what life has offered them, and neither does the community as a whole. To them their life is what life is and it has to be enjoyed and happiness is embedded in their community values and way of life. Would poverty alleviation, in the form of greater material wealth, bring them more happiness? If it led to the breakdown of their community values and its social support structures then it might not. This, then, is the dilemma faced by all those involved in poverty alleviation. Is material wealth the only measure of poverty and is the social cost of acquiring such wealth too high?

Poverty is a wicked problem

The concept of wicked problems emerged from public administration and policy research (Weber and Khademian, 2008a) and stemmed from a realisation that many problems defy established systems of defining problems and finding solutions. Wicked problems show characteristics which best fit any description of poverty, which is more likely to benefit from a wicked problem-management approach rather than a traditional problem-management one. Broadly, wicked problems can be

described as unstructured, cross-cutting and relentless (Weber and Khademian, 2008a); Rittel and Webber (1973) used the word wicked to mean thorny or tricky, or “wicked in a meaning akin to that of malignant (in contrast to benign) or vicious (like a circle) or tricky (like a leprechaun) or aggressive (like a lion, in contrast to the docility of a lamb)”.

Our experience in Lake Victoria fishing communities reveals that, by focusing concerns about poverty on individual situations, such as Jed’s, poverty is being deconstructed and transformed into a “tame problem.” Rittel and Webber (1973) contrasted “tame” from “wicked” problems by arguing that in tame problems all the information that would be required to solve them is available. Deconstructing Jed’s problems means that the solutions will not have been addressed as the problem, but only as the symptoms of the problem, and it is these that will have been addressed rather than the problem itself. Jed’s problems are both what he experiences daily (individual perspective) and the forces that have created these conditions (the structural forces at both national and global levels). The characteristics of wicked problems, therefore, bring out these structural issues (Table 1).

Table 1. A summary of the characteristics of “wicked problems” (from Rittel and Webber, 1973; Weber and Khademian, 2008b).

On	Wicked problems are/have	Aspect of characteristics
Definition	Unclear, problematic, tricky or thorny; causes that are difficult to identify; contradictory, incomplete; little consensus on what the problem is.	Unstructured
Solutions	No stopping rule - problem never solved once and for all; neither true or false but better or worse; no one shot operation; no set of potential solutions; requires large set of stakeholders to change their mindset.	Cross-cutting
Nature of problem	Unique; can be symptoms of other problems; can be explained in numerous ways; very complex; involves several trade-offs among competing values; socially embedded; public.	Persistent

First, wicked problems are not clear, but they are contradictory and they depend on who is defining them (Rittel and Webber, 1973). In our Lake Victoria case, poverty was viewed in different ways ranging from disability to ownership of wealth and to responses to emergency and we left this fishing village without any consensus from the fishers of what poverty meant to them. Their perceptions were highly varied and there was no general agreement as to what causes poverty, which makes poverty problems unstructured.

Second, because there are many different causes of poverty, there have to be many different solutions. Wicked problems do not have true-or-false, or right or wrong, solutions but tend to have solutions that are either better or worse. There is no single person who is an expert on wicked problems and so they cannot be domesticated into any discipline, or managed by policy-makers or managers (Narayan *et al.* 2000). Moreover, any one solution may require a large set of stakeholders to change their mindset, something which is difficult if not

impossible. Solutions to the problems of disability, wealth or dealing with emergencies in Nyakasenge village were perceived differently by different groups. To some, fishers needed to organise themselves and stop their persistent use of illegal gears, while to others there was a need for accessibility to credit facilities, provision of infrastructural facilities, and a reduction in the stringent government fishery regulations.

Third, the nature of wicked problems makes them quite unique to a particular area. For example, the Lake Victoria fishing communities face difficulties that may resemble those faced by fishers elsewhere such as a lack of adequate, safe water. But solutions to the problems are unique to a particular place and solutions to the provision of clean water cannot be the same in two different places. Wicked problems such as poverty are very complex as they involve trade-offs among competing values and may be symptoms of other problems. The final characteristic of a wicked problem is that it is difficult to tell whether or not the problem is solved as there is no finish line or

“stopping rule.” The problem cannot be solved once and for all.

Conclusion

Poverty is a problem and not merely a concept but its definition depends on who is defining it and how they are defining what it means. It is experienced differently in different places and there is no universal definition; the description may be the same at first but the impacts and possible solutions will differ from situation to situation. It is therefore a problem with a value judgments and moral issues rather than being a simple measurable inadequacy. Realistic judgements must consider the values and interests of those affected by poverty.

The complexity and context of poverty makes it a wicked problem whose meaning depends on the values and relationships within society. It is a composite problem, process and an experience that is not easily reducible to a single property. Although poverty cannot be isolated from the poor, its alleviation cannot similarly be focused entirely on them either. There is a need to broaden our knowledge of this problem by focusing not only on the conditions of the poor, but also on the whole process of cultural dynamism and social valuation. The broad concept of culture, not the narrow concept of the culture of poverty, therefore plays an important role in understanding the poverty problem.

Poverty should therefore not be treated as a straightforward problem because this is a recipe for failure. It is encouraging though to note that poverty is increasingly being understood as a wicked problem calling for an all-inclusive approach. The interactive governance theory provides a new perspective in understanding this problem; for this reason poverty, as a governance issue needs to rely on the collective judgement of stakeholders through a process that is participatory, communicative, and transparent (Jentoft and Chuenpagdee 2009). Furthermore, the theory presents an opportunity to assess governability of poverty. In this case, governability and its limitations can be examined with respect to the components of interactive governance, namely, systems-to-be-governed, governing system, and governing interactions (Kooiman *et al.*, 2005; Chuenpagdee and Jentoft, 2009). Assessment of governability of these components would be focused on the systems properties including diversity, complexity, dynamics, and scale.

Since poverty presents itself as a wicked problem, it would be prudent for those engaged in the study and alleviation of poverty to approach it with flexibility. The images that people hold of certain things may prove to be different when subjected to closer scrutiny because images can be powerful and judgmental. For instance, Hardin's (1969) “tragedy of the commons,” (TOC) the foundation for many ecosystem management proposals, assumes that freedom of choice will be exercised to such an extent that resources are destroyed and therefore impoverish the communities that depend on those resources. The TOC assumes an absence of relationships among resource users whereas in reality individuals within a community do not live as if they are isolated from others, they are constantly connected to one another. Thus, around Lake Victoria, the situation is more complex and individuals such as Jed live a life that is highly connected to others within the

community and defined by multiple values. Such relationships are so crucial that they become the defining and driving force of activities. Such relationships can only be appreciated with methodological and conceptual flexibility, a view of poverty as a set of qualities that need to be experienced on the ground through an interaction with those who would conventionally be defined as poor.

Finally, the dilemmas that the poverty problem presents require careful thought about the need to change people's conceptual referents. Research should focus on people's social context, culture, life experiences and exposure to social influences, in order to understand why they see life as they do. Policy-makers, on the other hand, might focus on whether it is ethical to change a person's social and cultural context in order to increase his or her happiness. These dilemmas are a means of broadening the debate on what Kooiman and Chuenpagdee (2005) call “orders of governance”: (1) focusing on problem-solving and opportunity creation; (2) focusing on building coherent governance institutions; and (3) a meta-governance order that focuses on values, and principles for the first and second orders. All three orders are crucial if poverty is to be effectively and legitimately governed. The first order would solve Jed's problems by, for instance, providing him with shelter, among other things. The second order would ensure that the solutions to Jed's problems are embedded in the institutional settings of his community, for instance, establishing a mechanism which strengthens community welfare system. These two governance orders can be addressed directly but in this paper I argue that Jed's condition needs to be looked at from a broader (meta-governance) perspective, involving more than simply fixing problems wherever possible. We need to change the conceptual image of poverty and recognise that it is a wicked problem, the solution to which largely depends on how we look at it.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Svein Jentoft and Jahn Petter Johansen for their constructive comments to this and earlier versions of this paper. I want also to thank Ellen Marie Jensen for her comments and all the editing work she has done. I would not forget to thank all anonymous reviewers and all those who have provided comments on this paper. I also wish to acknowledge funding from the Norwegian Research Council that has enabled the production of this paper.

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