

## Social Studies - World Topics

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# POVERTY

By Harry Jivenmukta

# WHAT IS POVERTY?

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**The state of one who lacks a usual or socially acceptable amount of money or material possessions.**

Poverty is said to exist when people lack the means to satisfy their basic needs. In this context, the identification of poor people first requires a determination of what constitutes basic needs. These may be defined as narrowly as;

**'those necessary for survival',**

or as broadly as;

**'those reflecting the prevailing standard of living in the community.'**

The first criterion would cover only those people near the borderline of starvation or death from exposure; the second would extend to people whose nutrition, housing, and clothing, though adequate to preserve life, do not measure up to those of the population as a whole. The problem of definition is further compounded by the noneconomic connotations that the word poverty has acquired. Poverty has been associated, for example, with poor health, low levels of education or skills, an inability or an unwillingness to work and high rates of disruptive or disorderly behaviour. While these attributes have often been found to exist with poverty, their inclusion in a definition of poverty would tend to obscure the relation between them and the inability to provide for one's basic needs. Whatever definition one uses, people commonly assume that the effects of poverty are harmful to both individuals and society.

Although poverty is a phenomenon as old as human history, its significance changed in the 20th century. Under traditional (i.e., non-industrialized) modes of economic production, widespread poverty had been accepted as inevitable. The total output of goods and services, even if equally distributed, would still have been insufficient to give the entire population a comfortable standard of living by prevailing standards. In the 20th century, however, this ceased to be the case in the highly industrialized countries, whose national outputs were sufficient to raise the entire population to a comfortable level if the necessary redistribution could be arranged without adversely affecting output. Among such countries were virtually all those of western Europe and some in central Europe, the United States and Canada, Japan and several smaller nations on the Pacific rim, the oil-rich nations of the Arabian Peninsula, and Australia and New Zealand. Poverty in these countries tended to have different patterns of distribution than in much of the rest of the world.

## Questions...

1. What is poverty?
2. How can we define degrees of poverty?
3. How does poverty differ today from 100 years ago?

# DEFINING POVERTY EXERCISE

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Most people think poverty is when someone has absolutely nothing; no home, food or extra clothes etc. There are many people in the developed countries who are poor but none of them would fall into the absolute poverty image we might have. Some definitions of poverty are:

- z **Absolute poverty** - this is a definition close to the traditional view of someone who does not even have the basic requirements to live.
- z **Relative poverty** - most poor people in developed countries would fall into this category. Relative poverty means that someone is poor in comparison to the other people around them. In this way if someone had enough food to eat on a regular basis and a home to live in but compared to the people living around them their quality of life was poor they could be said to be poor relative to the community in which they live.
- z **Income poverty** - this means that a person falls below an acceptable minimum limit in terms of the money they have coming in. The minimum limit is usually defined by the government of the country in question.
- z **Human poverty** - this definition looks at factors like life expectancy, malnutrition in children, illiteracy, and access to clean water etc.
- z **Basic needs** - this looks at things beyond money that a person needs in order to survive; employment, access to services, participation in society etc.

## Questions...

Taking the definitions above write a paragraph each on the types of poverty listed. Consider the following guidelines:

- z Give examples of the poverty,
- z List countries whose population might fall into this category,
- z Look at how things have changed in recent times,
- z Compare the poor people in this category with rich people.

Cyclical poverty refers to poverty that may be widespread throughout a population, but the occurrence itself is of limited duration. In nonindustrial societies (present and past), this sort of inability to provide for one's basic needs rests mainly upon temporary food shortages caused by natural phenomena or poor agricultural planning. Prices would rise because of scarcities of food, which brought widespread but temporary misery.

In industrialized societies the main cyclical cause of poverty is fluctuations in the business cycle, with mass unemployment during periods of depression or serious recession. Throughout the 19th and early 20th centuries, the industrialized nations of the world experienced business panics and recessions that temporarily enlarged the numbers of the poor. The United States' experience in the Great Depression of the 1930s exemplifies this kind of poverty. And until the Great Depression, poverty resulting from business fluctuations was accepted as an inevitable consequence of a natural process of market regulation. Relief was granted reluctantly to the unemployed to tide them over until the business cycle again entered an upswing. However, since the Great Depression, the chief means of alleviating poverty caused by business fluctuations have been a nation's fiscal, regulatory, and other policies designed to stimulate the economy, and direct government assistance to the victims of unemployment, either through unemployment compensation, welfare, and other subsidies or by employment on public-works projects. Although business depressions affect all segments of society, their impact is most severe on people of the lowest socioeconomic strata, because of their marginal resources.

## Questions...

1. What is cyclical poverty?
2. Give examples of cyclical poverty in the UK.
3. What are the effects of cyclical poverty:
  - z in the short term,
  - z in the long term?

Collective poverty involves a relatively permanent insufficiency of means to secure basic needs, a condition that may be so general as to describe the average level of life in a society or that may be concentrated in relatively large groups in an otherwise prosperous society. Both generalized and concentrated collective poverty may be transmitted from generation to generation, parents passing their poverty on to their children.

Collective poverty is relatively general and lasting in much of Asia, the Middle East, most of Africa, and large parts of South America and Central America. Life for the bulk of the population in these societies is at a minimal level. Nutritional deficiencies cause disease seldom seen by doctors in the highly developed countries. Low life expectancy, high levels of infant mortality, and poor health characterize life in these societies.

Collective poverty is usually related to economic underdevelopment. The total resources of many developing nations in Africa, Asia, and South and Central America would be insufficient to support the population adequately even if they were equally divided among all of the citizens.

An increase of the gross national product does not necessarily lead to an improved standard of living for the population at large, for a number of reasons. The most important reason is that, in many developing countries, the population grows even faster than the economy does, with no net reduction in poverty as a result. This increased population growth is primarily due to lowered infant mortality rates made possible by improved sanitary and disease-control measures. Unless such lowered rates eventually result in women bearing fewer children, the result is a sharp acceleration in population growth, which can reach rates of 3-4 percent annually in some cases. Many developing nations are also characterized by a long-standing system of unequal distribution of wealth, a system likely to continue despite marked increases in the gross national product.

### **Concentrated Collective Poverty.**

In many industrialized, relatively affluent countries, particular demographic groups are vulnerable to long-term poverty. In city ghettos, in regions bypassed or abandoned by industry, and in areas where agriculture or industry is inefficient and cannot compete profitably, there are found victims of concentrated collective poverty. These people, like those afflicted with generalized poverty, have higher mortality rates, poor health, low educational levels, and so forth when compared with the more affluent segments of society. Their chief economic traits are unemployment and underemployment, unskilled occupations, and job instability. Efforts at improvement focus on ways to bring the deprived groups into the mainstream of economic life by attracting new industry, introducing improved agricultural methods, and raising the level of skills of the employable members.

## Questions...

1. What is collective poverty?
2. What is the difference between collective and concentrated collective poverty?

# ACTION ON POVERTY - BY GOVERNMENTS

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Most people agree that in order to tackle poverty effectively nations should:

- z **Be at peace** - if a civil war or a war between nations is underway there is no time or energy to solve other problems.
- z **Be secure** - the emotional heart of the nation should be strong and have the will to do something about poverty and other issues.
- z **Have a responsible attitude towards the resources of the nation and the resources of the world** - it is only possible to help people if the understanding is there and people see that everyone should have equal access to resources and that resources should be used carefully and responsibly.

Often, government action to solve one aspect of poverty results in other aspects of poverty becoming worse. A good example of this is when governments try to get unemployed people back to work. By creating more training and job opportunities governments often also reduce unemployment benefit. The result is that the people are forced to look for jobs more actively. For the people who get jobs the tactic works, but for the ones who do not find jobs they are left with even less money to live on.

Some examples of what governments are doing to tackle poverty include:

- z In the **UK** the government has recognised and identified key areas of concern; poverty and social exclusion. A Social Exclusion Unit and Low Pay Unit has been set up but no real action has been taken to actively address poverty directly. The UK historically has many measures in place to tackle poverty and is generally in line with other European countries.
- z In **China** an ongoing programme since 1994 aims to eliminate absolute poverty from China. This includes measures to alleviate income poverty and increase spending on education and healthcare.
- z In the **Philippines** 4.5 million families live on the poverty line. The government has set up a Social Reform Group and has increased spending on social services. A programme to educate people about the need to protect natural resources is also underway.
- z Despite measures to alleviate poverty in the **USA** it is estimated that by 2002 there will be 2.6 million people living below the federal poverty line in the richest country in the world.

## Questions...

1. What conditions need to be in place before effective anti-poverty strategies can be implemented?
2. Do governments just make excuses for not tackling poverty by listing these requirements?
3. Find out about and list the existing anti-poverty measures in the UK and other European countries.
4. Choose two countries and write about their efforts to tackle poverty. Compare and contrast their efforts.

# ACTION ON POVERTY - WHAT POOR PEOPLE WANT

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One of the biggest blocks to solving poverty is that often governments and agencies do not listen to what poor people want or they do ask some poor people but then apply the results of this research to all poor people. It is clear that different poor communities need different solutions depending on their situation. The voices of poor people are often unheard.

**'How many poor people do you see at large international conferences which meet to solve our problems? They spend more on the hotel bill than we need to survive for a year! They don't ask us what we want, just tell us what to expect. And after the conference ends nothing changes...'**

There are three important areas which can be identified clearly and which poor people speak about below.

## **EMPOWERMENT.**

This means to give people the right and ability to make up their own minds and act for themselves.

**'The poor do not want you to impose your programmes to empower us. We know how to empower ourselves. We want your support for our decisions.'** *Karuawathie Menike - Sri Lanka.*

**'Give us back our voice, you have stolen it. Give us back our dignity.'** *UK coalition against poverty.*

## **EQUALITY.**

**'We need a change in attitude: if only people could stop looking down on the poor and recognize they have the same rights, the world would be a better place.'** *ATD Fourth World France.*

A woman asked what single event would change her life for the better answered **'to be born a man'**.

## **ECONOMICS.**

**'To overcome poverty we need the poor to have control over land and resources'.** *Chathi, from a tribe in India.*

**'People have to be given access to education, healthcare, safe water, adequate nutrition and family planning if they are to be helped to break vicious cycles of poverty'.** *Casa Alianza, Honduras.*

## Questions...

1. Why don't poor people attend conferences which deal with poverty?
2. What does empowerment mean? Why is it important to poor people?
3. Why would a woman say that the greatest single event which would change her life would be to become a man?
4. Why is control over land and resources important in overcoming poverty in the developing world?

The United Nations (UN) has on many occasions passed resolutions, made decisions, and undertaken to act to reduce poverty. The UN has set targets on poverty including:

- z In 1996 the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) set a goal to reduce the number of **people living in extreme poverty** by half by the year 2015. The factors which will determine the success of this goal include; the political will of the governments of the world and the relative peace or states of war which exist between now and 2015.
- z By the year 2000 to ensure that the **minimum life expectancy** in every country to be at least 60 years. This target should reach 70 years by 2005, and 75 years by 2015. The target for the year 2000 obviously has not been met and therefore the other targets also seem 'pie in the sky' reckoning. In fact in the poorest countries today, a third of the population do not reach the age of 40 years!
- z The **child mortality rate** in 2000 should be half of the 1990 figure. This means that in every 1000 children born all but 70 should survive to the age of five years old. The target for 2015 is that the death rate should fall to only 45 in every 1000 children born. The real obstacles to this target is that there is still hunger and disease which often runs out of control in some parts of the world. In the developed countries the mortality rate is 18 in every 1000, whilst in some developing countries it is 85 per 1000 births.
- z By the year 2000 to achieve levels of **primary education** so that 80% of all children can go to school and by 2015 reach a 100% success rate. The problem here lies with the inability of many third world countries to find the money to build schools and employ teachers. Education rates have increased markedly in the past 10 years and will continue to grow, although it is not clear whether the UN targets would be met.
- z By the year 2000 to make access to **primary healthcare** universal and to eliminate many of the most common diseases including polio and address vitamin deficiency. There has been great success in eliminating diseases, although universal access to healthcare is difficult to measure.

## Questions...

1. Taking the points above, one by one, do you think that the targets can be met?
2. Make your own estimation when the targets can be met if you disagree with the dates above.
3. Once these targets are met, what else can the United Nations do to alleviate poverty?

# OPINION 1 - INTERNATIONAL AID

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*We in the West should not really be helping the developing nations with handouts and aid for two main reasons:*

- z There are many poor people in our own countries who need help and we should help them first.*
- z By giving free handouts to the poor people in developing countries it actually causes more poverty and dependency because their own farmers cannot sell crops if we are giving them out free.*

*On the first point, I think that we have a responsibility to help our own poor people first. After all, the money that we use is contributed in taxes by the people that live here. We can raise the standard of the whole population if we can lift the poorer sections of our society to a higher level of employment opportunities, education, child care, and health. In doing these things we would also save money by reducing the amounts we pay out in welfare benefits. The people would be better educated and so would contribute to the wealth of the nation more, and there would be less crime and deviancy.*

*On the second point, many aid agencies agree that simply giving handouts to poor nations is of no use. Why should farmers in these nations bother to plant crops if they are not going to be able to sell them and make any profits because the West dumps free grain in time of need? By giving things for free, people get into the habit of not doing anything but simply expecting to receive help. We are partly responsible for the poverty in the Third World because we do not encourage these people to do things for themselves. Yes, we should help in times of real crises like starvation and epidemics, but we should make it clear that they should help themselves most of the time.*

*Sometimes aid can be an emotive issue and we are blinkered into thinking we are doing good when in fact in the long term we might be doing harm. The problems of poverty are very complex and simple solutions wont work.*

## Questions...

1. What do you think of the viewpoint expressed above?
2. Is the first responsibility of any nation to look after its own poor people?
3. Is it possible to compare poverty in the UK with poverty in some other countries?
4. Does international aid help or hinder developing nations?

*There are many reasons why people who live in the West should help people in developing nations:*

- z We are all human beings and should have equal rights to basic things like shelter, food, education and healthcare.*
- z We live on the same planet and the poverty of one part of the world makes us all poorer in the end including morally poorer, spiritually poorer, and materially poorer.*

*There are many ways that we can help to alleviate poverty in a positive way. Handouts do work in the short term because they save people from immediate starvation or disease. But in the medium term other things can help like:*

- z Building wells so that people can have access to fresh water.*
- z Building schools so that everyone at least gets a basic education.*
- z Having mobile health clinics so that diseases can be treated and other fairly simple treatments like cataract operations which save the sight of people.*
- z Educating mothers about childcare and hygiene so that people can help themselves to a better life.*
- z Setting up cooperatives so that people can share the land or work together to produce things that can be sold overseas.*

*In the end we have a moral responsibility to help other people who may not be as comfortable as we are. It goes beyond questions of money or charity. Everyone has the right to live with dignity and to develop their full potential as human beings. If we do not let people have that right we are all responsible and equally guilty. Quality of life should be a right not a privilege.*

## Questions...

1. What do you think of the viewpoint expressed above?
2. How practical are the solutions offered for alleviating poverty?
3. Does solving poverty go **'beyond questions of money or charity'**?

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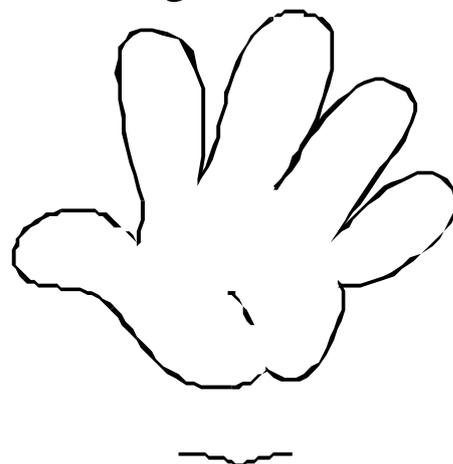
## GIVE FIVE GO REASONS

why there should be even one person living in poverty...

*There is enough money, resources, and food in the world to feed, house and care for every human being. Why then are there so many poor people in the world. I'll tell you; it is because some people are too greedy to share! And the ones who are greedy are mostly in the West. Think about all the things you have at home. Think about all the food you throw away because you 'don't fancy it'. Think about how much of the developing nations' resources we use up.*

*Did you know, for example, that the USA uses more than one third of the whole world's resources. That means about 260 million people out of 6 Billion use one third of the resources currently available. We can solve all the problems which cause poverty right now if we wanted to, but the truth is that many people in the West don't want to because it might affect their comfortable lives.*

*How can we convince people to be more sharing? How can we wipe out the scourge of poverty? Give me five ways.*



# FIVE

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Questions...

## MY FIVE POINT PLAN

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2.

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4.

5.

Questions...