

POVERTY AS INJUSTICE: REFOCUSING THE POLICY AGENDA

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The Argument: The Sources of Injustice

The theme of the paper

This paper argues that structural injustice remains the source of poverty and exclusion. This recognition of structural concerns is yet to be incorporated into the reform agendas of the developing world. This paper is designed to address the structural sources of poverty and injustice with a view to refocusing the policy agenda which has driven national policymaking as well the programmes of international financial institutions. Its aim is to initiate an exploration for a more relevant agenda of structural reforms where the primary mission will be to correct injustice through incorporating the excluded into the mainstream of development.

The structural dimensions of poverty

A decade ago the World Bank was arguing that rapid growth was the best solution for eradicating poverty. A commitment to growth-sustaining policy reforms, inspired by the *Washington Consensus*, backed by temporary safety nets for those who were possible victims of such growth, was expected to reduce the proportion of those living in poverty. Needless to say, the success story of the Asian Tigers as well as Chile, provided the substantive foundations of this hypothesis. A decade later, in WDR 2000, the World Bank has come to terms with the proposition that policy reforms were not enough to alleviate let alone eradicate poverty. Structural concerns, of a rather more basic nature than the structural adjustments demanded by the *Washington Consensus*, were recognized as central to the design of policy reforms. It is arguable that this recognition of structural concerns by agencies such as the World Bank, as a source of poverty has contributed little to transform the policy discourse. The new agenda for poverty focused on the contemporary, near-universal initiatives across the developing countries (DC), to prepare *Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers* (PRSP), appears to have been designed to keep them eligible for aid from the Bretton Woods Institutions (BWI), the World Bank and IMF. As a result the PRSPs across the world look remarkably similar in their essentially astructural design and remain wedded to the macro-economic policy model which was integral to the reform programmes initiated by the BWI in the 1980s. This approach to poverty alleviation is no more likely to bear fruit than an earlier generation of policy reforms. Setting targets under the *Millennium Development Goals* is no substitute for initiating a process of structural change to correct the injustice of poverty.

The assumptions underlying this structuralist perspective on poverty recognizes that neither targetting of development resources to the poor, nor the promotion of growth, are likely to resolve the problem of poverty. The poor are embedded in certain inherited structural arrangements such as insufficient access to productive assets as well as human resources, unequal capacity to participate in both domestic and global markets and undemocratic access to political power. These structural features of poverty reinforce each other to effectively exclude the poor, from participating in the benefits of development or the opportunities provided by more open markets. In such a system even targetted programmes of poverty alleviation carry transaction costs due to the institutional structures which mediate the delivery of resources to the poor.

It is, however, not enough to recognize the salience of structural issues in the poverty discourse without addressing the political economy which underlies the structural features of a society. Poverty originates in the unequal command over both economic and political resources within the society and the unjust nature of a social order which perpetuates these inequities. We may term these inequities as structural injustice. Such injustice remains pervasive in most societies exposed to endemic poverty. Any credible agenda to eradicate poverty must seek to correct the structural injustices which perpetuate poverty. The main areas of structural injustice may be addressed in relation to :

- Productive assets
- Markets
- Human Development
- Governance.

It would be appropriate to add the injustice of asymmetrical globalization to the above themes. However, the theme of globalization needs to be addressed as an issue in its own right. Responding to the unequal and immiserising incidence of globalization on countries and social groups around the world merits separate discussion.

Unequal access to assets

In all countries faced with endemic poverty and indeed many middle-income countries, inequitable access to wealth and knowledge desempower the poor from participating competitively in the market place. Indeed the market itself, as it operates in the real world

rather than in text books, is designed to compromise the opportunities on offer to the poor. In most societies, with a substantial proportion of the population living in poverty, the poor have insufficient access to land, water and water bodies. Where they access such resources they do so under exploitative tenancy arrangements.

Such inequities in title and access to agrarian assets do not derive from the competitive play of the market but from the injustices of history and therefore lack moral as well as social legitimacy. Such an inequitable access to productive assets in the rural economy also tends to be inefficient because small farmer's have proven to be both more productive as well as likely to spend most of their income derived from their meagre assets, in stimulating secondary activity in the rural economy. Where there is a dichotomy between the owners of land and the actual tiller of the land, this serves as a disincentive to both investment of capital, as well as more productive effort on the land.

Unequal participation in the market

Within the prevailing property structures of society, the rural poor, in particular, remain disconnected from the more dynamic sectors of the market, particularly where there is scope for benefiting from the opportunities provided by globalisation. The fast growing sectors of economic activity tend to be located within the urban economy, where the principal agents of production tend to be the urban elite, who own the corporate assets which underwrite the faster growing sectors of the economy. Even in the export-oriented rural economy, in those areas linked with the more dynamic agro-processing sector, a major part of the profits, in the chain of value addition, accrue to those classes who control corporate wealth.

The rural poor, therefore, interface with the dynamic sectors of the economy only as producers and wage earners, at the lowest end of the production and marketing chain, where they sell their produce and labour under severely adverse conditions. This leaves the rural poor with little opportunity for sharing in the opportunities provided by the market economy for value addition to their labours.

Unequal access to human development

Low productivity remains an important source of income poverty. Higher income and ownership of wealth remains closely correlated to higher levels of education. Low productivity, thus, originates in insufficient access to education and technology. However, a more serious problem facing the poor, in many developing countries, lies in the growing disparity in the quality of education which divides the rural and urban areas as well as the majority of the people from a much narrower elite. In such societies today, the principal inequity in the education sector is manifested in the growing divide between a better educated elite with access to private as well as foreign education and the poor who remain condemned to remain captives within an insufficiently funded and poorly governed public education system supplemented by poor quality private or denominational schools. In an increasingly knowledge based global economy, which is driving the IT revolution, inequitable access to quality education, relevant to the dynamics of the market, could emerge as the principal deprivation of the rural poor.

Insufficient and inequitable access to health care is also compounding the inequities in education. The dominant problem in most developing countries is not the complete absence of health care but the incapacity of the public health care systems to deliver quality health care or for the market to meet the needs of the poor. Ill-provisioned public and private health services expose the poor to a life of insecurity, where earning opportunities can be disrupted by episodes of ill health. Poor health and nutrition can undermine both individual as well as national productivity and can influence the lifetime opportunities of the poor. In contrast, a small elite who are positioned to avail of private and even foreign health care, enjoy first world health standards. This growing disparity between the health status of the elite and the poor in such countries is inherently unjust because it denies all citizens equal chances of living a healthy life and compromises their capacity to compete in the market place.

Unjust governance

This inequitable and unjust social and economic universe is compounded by a system of unjust governance which discriminates against the poor and effectively disenfranchises them from the political benefits of a democratic process. The poor, where they are not directly oppressed by the machinery of state, remain underserved by available public

services. Where such services are at all accessible to the poor, they pay high transaction costs for these services. The agencies of law enforcement insufficiently protect the poor and frequently oppress them for personal gain as well as on behalf of the elite. The judicial system denies the poor elementary justice both on grounds of poverty as well as the social bias of most Third World judiciaries.

In such a social universe the poor remain tyrannized by state as well as money power and have to seek the protection of their oppressors, within a system of patron-client relationships, which perpetuates the prevailing hierarchies of power. Where the democratic process has been renewed, often after long episodes of autocratic rule, the poor are denied adequate access to representation in the systems of democratic governance from the local to the national level. Representative institutions tend to be monopolized by the affluent and socially powerful who then use their electoral office to enhance their wealth and thereby perpetuate their hold over power. In such an inequitable and politically unjust environment, the benefits of democracy remain the privilege of the elite supported by small collectives of sectional power.

Policy Interventions to Correct Structural Injustice

In the second part of this paper we address the issue of policy interventions, at the macro-level needed to confront the issue of structural injustice. This discussion addresses the issue of correcting injustice through empowerment of the poor, by strengthening their capacity to participate in a market economy and democratic polity. The proposed policy interventions are structured under the following heads:

- Expanding the ownership and control of the poor over productive assets
- Enhancing their access to a knowledge based society
- Strengthening the capacity of the poor to compete in the market place
- Redesigning budgetary policy to reach public resources to the poor.
- Restructuring monetary policy to deliver credit and provide savings instruments to the poor
- Designing institutions for the poor
- Empowering the poor

The subsequent discussion is largely suggestive and is designed to initially stimulate debate as a prelude to designing more substantive policy proposals.

Expanding the ownership and control of the rural poor over productive assets

The principal assets available to the rural poor tend to be land and water. The reservations of some scholars and international agencies about confiscatory land reform, remains open to challenge largely because the prevailing title to such land, in most developing countries, is grounded in unjust and often illegitimately acquired title to such land. However, we need to recognize that the correlation of political forces to underwrite a radical agrarian reform are not present in too many countries today. If such a coalition could be put in place it is arguable that a radical reform, which could transform the political economy of rural society, would not only help to end rural poverty but could also dynamise the economies as well as democratize the polities of many Third World countries.

Whilst social revolution may not be round the corner there is no reason why we cannot explore agrarian reforms which are politically feasible as well as economically sustainable. Within such a perspective, four areas of agrarian reform could be considered:

- Transforming tenancy rights into either ownership rights for the tenant or through right of permanent tenancy.
- Redistribution of ownership of uncultivated land
- Giving title to lands and water courses owned by the State.
- Correcting injustice in the system of land administration

Transfer of tenancy rights into permanent leaseholds has already been implemented in the agrarian reforms of the Philippines in the 1970s and 1980s and in the State of West Bengal, in India, under *Operation Barga*. The operative issue here is to give those who actually cultivate the land, a direct stake in the land. Without legal title to ownership or tenancy of land the cultivator retains little incentive to invest in the land nor are they able to use land as collateral to access the credit market. The first principles of both market and institutional economics would therefore suggest that some form of agrarian reform

remains part of an unaddressed agenda of economic reforms. We, therefore, need to explore why the World Bank, has not applied aid conditionalities in the service of agrarian reform whilst it has never hesitated in pressurizing aid dependent Third World governments to enforce changes in property rights through privatization of SOEs or promoting decollectivization of farms in the transitional economies.

There are, obviously, significant socio-political problems which need to be addressed within particular countries, which remain specific to the design of such agrarian reforms, particularly where land remains a source of power within rural society. Here substantive work is needed in at least some identifiable countries where introduction of agrarian reforms can immediately lead to positive gains for the landless or landpoor at relatively limited political cost. Initially such work may focus on :

- i. A few countries where tenancy reforms could be introduced. This should indicate the resources needed to either buy up lands under tenant farming or to compensate owners who would be willing to surrender permanent lease hold rights on the land
- ii. Countries and areas where sizeable amounts of untenanted and uncultivated land remain available. In such countries a comprehensive rather than project related strategy for transferring land not directly under productive use, to the ownership of small farmers, should be worked out. The financial legal, social and political implications of such a reform process should be spelt out.
- iii. Countries where the system of land administration is both inefficient as well as corrupt and is used by rural elites to erode the property rights of the weak. Here programmes may be designed to reform and simplify the land administration so that this can be made transparent and serviceable to the weaker members of society.
- iv. Studies in a selection of countries exposed to high rural poverty, to comprehensively identify scope for policy interventions in the following areas:
 - Distribution of public lands, as well as rights over water bodies in the public domain which could be assigned exclusively to the poor.

- Distribution of forest lands in the public domain, as also lands alongside public roads and water bodies, for community development through groups of the poor.

What is suggested here is a conscious departure from the donor designed project approach towards a national macro-programme which identifies available productive assets for distribution to the poor. Such an exercise should work out the modalities, as well as estimate the costs of the transfer, spell out the institutional arrangements to sustain such transfers, indicate provisions for credit, technological support and marketing arrangements and finally estimate the social and political implications of the process of asset transfer. Such a series of exercises at mapping reform opportunities at the national and global level, backed by a process of social advocacy could be used to build a national constituency for reform. This would put a major issue of structural reform, with far reaching implications for empowering the rural poor, both before national legislatures as well as the global development community, who could then be encouraged to seek to mobilize funding as well as political support to underwrite such a reform process.

Enhancing access to human resources

In the area of human development, courtesy of the pioneering work of scholars such as Amartya Sen and visionaries such as Mahbub ul Haq, human development (HD) is already recognized as a mainstream concern of the development agenda. As a result, in most DCs budget allocation and GDP ratios for HD in many developing countries have shown some improvement as have HD indicators. Today some MDG goals for HD across the globe remain within the realm of possibility. However, such quantitative gains in HD budgets and goals have done little to bridge the growing societal divide within the education and health care system of many of these countries. The interventions proposed in this paper, thus, move beyond quantitative target setting by placing emphasis on democratizing access to education and health care by enhancing the quality of HD services directed to the deprived.

Such an agenda for human development would move beyond ensuring education or health for all, which should remain on every agenda. The priority for the next decade should move towards substantially enhancing investment for the purpose of upgrading the quality and governance of schools and health care facilities serving low income groups to a level where do not feel disadvantaged compared to the expensively educated

members of society. Such a goal carries formidable implications as to costs and governance. What may, therefore, be more feasible is a phased series of investments in upgrading these public facilities so that the budgetary impact and governance problems could be more easily absorbed. At the same time, within the next 5 to 10 years, the graduates of such a process of quality enhancement efforts should be seen to be competing for university places with the elite, endowed with a no less robust state of health than the children of the elite. The spectacle of children of the poor rising to positions of professional, economic and political influence will, itself, have an empowering effect on the poor to demand more rapid democratization of opportunities for human capacity development.

Until public services in the health sector can be brought to a competitive level with better quality private services, public resources should be channeled to establishing a system of health, disability and old age insurance for the poor to enable them to also access private health care. A number of countries in the DCs offer some form of insurance coverage through public and private programmes but these facilities in most countries have a rather narrow coverage. This system needs to be substantially expanded, through collaboration between the state, private sector and possibly the non-governmental organizations (NGO). A similar system of public scholarships should be targeted to the children of the poor to access private education, where the better endowed private institutions and also the more elite-oriented publicly funded state institutions should be encouraged to set aside a proportion of places for those living in poverty.

The knowledge revolution is now being brought within the reach of the poor by advances in telecommunications. Formidable opportunities are being opened up in the area of distance learning and telemedicine, for urban standards of education, medical diagnosis and prescription to be delivered to the most remote villages. Here major investments to build the infrastructure to take the IT revolution to the villages, remains a major goal of public and global development policy. *Grameenphone* in Bangladesh remains an important example of how poor rural women can be brought into the communications revolution as both providers as well as users of IT services. In similar vein, the direction of R&D agendas, at the global level, to not only address the concerns of the poor, as in the case of HIV/AIDS, but to develop technologies for the rural poor, merit urgent

attention. The related global public goods debate needs to be taken forward so that global development aid can be directed to delivering such goods to the poor across the world.

Strengthening the capacity of the poor to compete in the market place

Market based institutions for the poor

The capacity of the poor to operate on more equal terms in the market place, depends in considerable measure on their capacity for collective action. The weakness of the poor, in the market place, originates in their isolation. Here investment in institutions, whether sponsored by NGOs or representing collective action by the poor, in the form of marketing cooperatives or corporate bodies of the poor, need to be imaginatively conceived and developed.

Since the developing world is littered with the debris of captured, corrupted or failed cooperatives, directing collectives of the poor into such a risk-prone area as the market should not be underestimated. However, the issue remains to invest the poor with the capacity to develop the financial and organizational strength to sell their products and services, at a time and in a market, which offers them the best terms, rather than to sell their produce out of distress or the need to subsist. Such a perspective would demand interventions in the macro-credit market to underwrite such marketing ventures as well as deployment of professional management skills to assist the poor in participating in the market place.

It should be kept in mind that commercial managers are professionals who can be hired in the market place and can be provided with incentives for good performance by collectives of the poor no less than corporate enterprises. The task ahead would be to empower the poor to draw upon such professionals without feeling socially intimidated by their own hired employees. Conversely, such a process should encourage the emergence of a socially motivated class of managers who would not necessarily remain undercompensated, who could specialize in serving such organizations of the poor who have dared to venture into the market place. International development agencies can be persuaded to initially underwrite some credit support as well as management inputs for such commercial organizations of the poor. But in the final analysis such ventures must be sustained in the market place.

Adding value to the labour of the poor

Many NGOs around the world are already providing marketing services to the poor, for particular commodities, in particular markets. However, the best service that can be provided is to help the poor to add value to their labours by moving upmarket through either agro-processing or providing inputs to the corporate sector. The pioneering role of Amul Dairy in India and more recently, BRAC, in Bangladesh, to enable small dairy farmers, or just poor households who own a cow, to become part of a milk processing chain, enables the poor to share in the profits from selling pasteurized milk or cheese in the metropolitan market. Similarly Grameen Bank's initiative to support rural handloom weavers to upgrade their product to provide *Grameencheck* fabrics, as inputs to Bangladesh's leading export industry of readymade garments, provides significant new opportunities for value addition to the labours of the poor, rural based, weavers.

Such initiatives could be taken one step further, by financially empowering the vast body of small farmers servicing the private agro-processing sector, as well as handloom weavers, to become equity stakeholders in the upstream enterprises which add value to their produce or labour. Tobacco, cotton, sugar cane and jute growers, servicing export-oriented corporate bodies, could be brought together, as corporate bodies or as members of a dedicated Mutual Fund, to acquire a stake in these private corporate bodies engaged in the task of value addition. This marriage between the small farmer and the downstream agro-processor could also be promoted by local civil society organizations and consummated through a dowry provided by both multilateral and bilateral funding agencies to organized groups of small farmers to buy into such ventures.

At the global level better use needs to be made of such organizations as the *Fair Trade Movement* (FTM), which carry the produce of poor farmers and craft artisans into the retail markets of the developed world. The FTM remains a commendable initiative in cutting out global market enterprises who normally appropriate much of the value addition in the market chain for primary produce. However, such micro-producer in the DCs, usually tend to be linked to the FTM through locally based small commercial enterprises or NGOs who serve as intermediaries between local producers and the global market. If the FTM remains committed to its objective of maximizing the retention of value addition with the primary producers they should begin by encouraging their client-base of small businesses in the DCs, who reach out to small producers, to transform their suppliers or artisans into

shareholders of the local business enterprises. Where feasible, the artisans should form their own corporate enterprises or cooperatives to empower themselves to deal directly with FTM. At the same time, FTM should, itself, consider incorporating itself and providing an equity stake in such a formidable global corporate enterprise to the small farmers and artisans whose products are being sold in the supermarkets of the developed world. The emergence of such a global corporation of and for the small and the weak primary producers would do much to not just build global solidarity amongst the deprived but to transform this into market power. There is no reason why the *Fair Trade Movement* could not aspire to emerge as the Lever Brothers of the poor.

Redesigning budgetary policy to reach public resources to the poor

Restructuring the budget

In its present configuration, budgetary policy aggregates public expenditure programmes without setting any explicit goal to serve the poor who tend to remain marginalized in the budgetary concerns of most developing countries. In the absence of any explicit structuring of the budget to serve the poor most budgets contain a plethora of projects/programmes ostensibly targeted to the poor. In many least developed countries (LDCs) such pro-poor programmes tend to be underwritten by a variety of aid donors. A not insignificant part of the expenditure targeted to the poor, does not reach the poor, due to high transaction and delivery costs, which enrich the non-poor or expatriate consultants.

Much of this misdirection of public expenditure is concealed under opaque budgetary practices which make it impossible to identify the share of the budget directly reaching the poor or estimating its outcomes on the circumstance of the poor. In this respect, targeted aid programmes are no less likely to carry high transaction costs, with poor outcomes and weak sustainability.

Any serious attempt to dedicate public expenditure budgets to the concerns of the poor, should be transparently structured to clearly identify not just projects explicitly targeted to the poor but resources delivered to and directly impacting on their lives. A number of such efforts, usually at the level of civil society, have attempted, every year, to restructure the national budget in order to isolate its contribution towards poverty eradication. The pro-poor budgeting exercises in Porto Alegre, Brazil, have acquired global recognition.

However, most other such efforts remain under-resourced, some carry unresolved conceptual problems and most such initiatives tend to exercise insufficient leverage for persuading Finance Ministers to more carefully calibrate their budgets to reach the poor. Nor have likeminded donors been any more successful than civil society, in spite of many efforts at promoting budgetary reform through provision of technical assistance, in making national budgets more transparent in defining their impact or reaching public resources to the poor.

Inducting the poor into the budgetary process

Apart from targeting public expenditure to the poor the more serious limitation of the budgetary process lies in the absence of consultation with the poor. A quite disproportionate amount of time is spent consulting business leaders and economists on budget design. Much less, if any, effort is invested in consulting the poor about what they expect from the budgetary process. Some consultative exercises, often at donor initiative have tended to produce some rather self-conscious exercises where the sponsors end up hearing what they want to hear. A number of civil society initiatives to consult the poor have yielded more promising results. However, unless such efforts are institutionalized and can serve to influence policymakers, they degenerate into episodic exercises in providing some catharsis for the grievances of the poor.

Ideally, it is governments who should reach out to the poor whose votes elect them to office. Such an effort should not, however, manifest itself as a pro-forma, pre-budget exercise in bureaucratic tourism of some rural areas but should be institutionalized into the structures of governance. The consultative process, each year, should be preceded by a process whereby the concerns of the poor are systematically recorded and reviewed by the budget makers before they embark on their annual consultative encounters with the poor.

All such efforts at making budgets more transparent and consulting the poor will be meaningless if they do not end up reprioritizing public expenditures to put resources into those sectors that serve the poor. This process will have to precede the task of ensuring that allocated resources actually reach the poor. However, redirecting budget priorities is not a zero sum game and the political economy of a society needs to be taken into

account in any discussion on the budget. If the poor are to compete with the Defense Forces to influence the allocative choices of the Finance Ministry, they will need to collectively empower themselves to compete in the political arena rather than to depend exclusively on the social conscience of the policymakers.

Fiscal policy

The instruments of fiscal policy in many developing countries are usually not designed to address the concerns of the poor. It must, therefore, be recognized that fiscal systems can also be redesigned to do more than provide incentives for business enterprises and relief to the poor. The poor are also producers of goods and services and remain sensitive to the incentives offered by a well-designed fiscal policy. The instruments of direct as well as indirect taxation need to be calibrated to make better use of their distributive and poverty reducing power. Fiscal specialists should be invited to join hands with poverty specialists to rethink the design and mechanisms for formulating a fiscal policy which can better serve the needs of the poor.

Restructuring Monetary Policy

Taking micro-credit out of the ghetto

Nowhere is there a greater need for developing a macro-perspective for poverty eradication than in the area of monetary policy. The instruments of monetary policy appear to be exclusively targeted towards ensuring macro-economic stability, moderating inflation and meeting the credit needs of the corporate sector. The financial needs of the poor, once left to the informal sector, have now been segregated in the micro-credit market. This apartheid within the monetary system remains a major anomaly in the global development discourse. The micro-credit movement has, in many ways, revolutionized the banking system of many countries such as Bangladesh by moving a large segment of the rural population, from the informal to the formal capital market through access to institutional credit. In Bangladesh 15 million poor borrowers, mostly women, have graduated from the informal money market into organized banking, where recognition of their innate sense of fiduciary responsibility for repaying loans and making regular savings has been institutionalised. These numbers are comparable to those who participate in the commercial banking system. No less important, the micro-credit system

has established the creditworthiness of the poor and laid to rest the myth that only men of property should be eligible to access the institutional banking system.

It is not intended here to discuss the merits and limitations of micro-credit or to suggest that it is the panacea for poverty eradication. Indeed, it could be argued that, by its very nature, micro-credit can never aspire to eradicate poverty since it only addresses one component of the various markets which condition the lives of the rural poor. It is arguable that by locking the poor into the micro-credit system, based on the fiduciary responsibility of the household, they have been excluded from participating in the macro-economy, have been isolated from collective action and condemned to live on the fringes of the poverty line. It is, therefore, not surprising that countries with the most substantive exposure to micro-credit, remain mired in poverty. This caveat on the limits of micro-credit remains without prejudice to the enormous contribution of micro-credit in alleviating poverty and distress, as well as enhancing the self-worth of the poor.

Regrettably, few Finance Ministers in the developing world have registered the crucial lessons from the micro-credit revolution that the poor are bankable and creditworthy. The logic of this discovery would be to enable micro-credit organisations to graduate into corporate banks or financial enterprises, owned by the poor. This, indeed, is the path followed by Grameen Bank which is a corporate body with over 2 million shareholders, composed mostly of poor women, who are also the clientele of the Bank. Bangladesh and indeed a number of other developing countries, are ready to sustain many more such banks, owned by the poor and serving the poor. Given the high level of non-performing loans in the regular banking system of Bangladesh, the fact that Grameen Bank, with a credit volume comparable to the largest commercial banks, can limit its portfolio of non-performing loans in the range of 5%, demonstrates that it has the capacity to operate as a competitive commercial bank, whilst serving the needs of the poor. There is, today, no reason why such organizations, of the maturity of Grameen Bank, with such a consistent record of debt recovery, should not graduate into the macro-finance system by accessing the deposits of the public and even marketing its assets at the global level, through such financial instruments as securitisation, which are in widespread use in more advanced financial systems.

Restructuring financial services to serve the poor

If Grameen Bank can move upmarket, there is no reason why commercial banks should not redirect their loan portfolios to the poor on account of their creditworthiness, particularly in an environment when many of their largest commercial borrowers remain habitual defaulters. This is not to suggest that commercial bankers have to immediately move out of their air-conditioned offices and visit each client in their village home, as is the practice with the micro-credit organisations. A number of commercial banks in South Asia are already using NGOs and even community-based organizations to retail banking services to the poor. Such organizations which reach out to the grassroots are uniquely equipped to link the urban-centric financial institutions to the wider concourse of the poor. Commercial banks can use these grassroots institutions to adjust their perspective as well as portfolios to the market opportunities provided by the poor who remain highly bankable and yet are deprived of the wide range of services that they need.

Corporate banks may be more inclined to do this if the government were to incorporate such a redirection of banking services into the design of financial sector reforms. The World Bank has, for many years, been promoting financial sector reforms across the developing world to correct distortions ostensibly attributed to public policy failures. Regrettably, there is no evidence of any recognition by the World Bank of the most glaring market failure in the financial system which deprives millions of potentially creditworthy customers of financial services. Nor has there been any serious effort in the various BWI induced reform processes to restructure the macro-financial system to deliver financial services to the poor on grounds of both market efficiency as well as alleviating poverty.

Mutual Funds for the Poor

Apart from the issue of redesigning monetary policy to deliver credit to the poor, the monetary system also needs to put in place a much wider spectrum of financial instruments which can serve to mobilize the savings of the poor. An organisation such as Grameen Bank has accumulated Tk. 10 billion (about \$187 million) in savings from its 2.3 million members. All these savings remain on deposit with Grameen Bank and are used for further lending to its members. Savings mobilized by other NGOs in Bangladesh, as well as by individual households, indicate that the poor remain formidable

savers. In India, a large number of small community organizations in Andhra Pradesh State, have, in aggregate, accumulated savings of around \$180 million which remain on deposit with the banks.

The monetary system needs to design special financial instruments to attract these micro-savings into the corporate sector, particularly where it can be structured to serve the poor. Again, Grameen Bank has taken the initiative in launching the first Mutual Fund of the poor, where it is providing opportunities for investing a small fraction (Tk. 150 million) of the savings of its members, in a managed, close-end, Mutual Fund which would invest its portfolio in the corporate sector. The potential of this experiment has to be tested within the small, rather unstable capital market of Bangladesh.

Whatever may be the fate of the Grameen Fund, the concept of Mutual Funds for the poor provides a significant institutional mechanisms to move the poor out of the village economy and into the more dynamic corporate sector, to a stage where a significant share of corporate wealth could be owned by the poor. The savings of the poor can not only augment the savings base but also broaden the investment capacity of the economy, whilst transforming the poorest rural household into stakeholders in the process of national economic growth.

The channeling of the savings of the poor into corporate investments should be matched by the channeling of urban savings to finance the corporate as well as micro-credit needs of the poor. An integrated monetary system is a two-way street where financial intermediation by the banks should be able to channel the savings of the rich to underwrite the investment needs and creative capacity of the poor. Within such a perspective, credit from the commercial banks should also be made available to organizations of the poor to leverage their investments in the corporate sector.

Such an integrated financial system carries obvious risks associated with the nature of the market mechanism, as well as the probity of the corporate sector, which will demand special safeguards to protect the interests of the poor. But unless these opportunities for linking the poor to the corporate sector are explored through widening the horizons of

monetary policy, the poor will remain permanent captives in the ghetto of the micro-economy.

Expanding the stakes of the poor

The Mutual Fund is but one institutional mechanisms to link the poor to the corporate sector. The underlying premise of the Mutual Fund is the notion of creating possibilities for the poor to own corporate assets. We have already identified the opportunities for linking the farmers to the agro-processing corporate sector by giving them an equity stake in such enterprises. At the same time, the agro-corporations should be motivated to invest in improving the productivity and capacities of their rural partners.

Financial policy could also be restructured to ensure that all assets, from urban land, to real estate development, from banks to corporate trading houses, could be redesigned to accommodate the poor as equity partners. The two institutional instruments to make this possible remain the Mutual Fund and the need for private limited companies to transform themselves into public limited companies. Here monetary and fiscal policy can provide incentives to encourage the corporatisation of private wealth along with the reservation of space for equity ownership of this wealth by the poor.

It may be suggested that the opportunities for democratizing ownership of corporate wealth should not be limited to the rural poor but could be extended to workers, to own shares in the enterprises where they work. The 1.2 million women, mostly from the rural areas, who earn monthly wages of around \$30 and provide the substantive value addition in Bangladesh's principal export of readymade garments, are no less deserving of being made stakeholders in the most dynamic sector of the economy, than are the rural poor. Similarly, workers in banana, sugarcane or palm oil plantations could be given an equity stake in the enterprises where they work.

Institutions of the Poor

Collective action by the poor

The poor survive as individuals with no institutional persona. The primary task of building institutions for the poor should be to enable them to rediscover their collective

identity. The forging of such a collective identity does not, however, develop out of abstract notions of identity but is likely to emerge out of a process of collective action. Such collective action tends to be constructed around particular social actions or through shared participation in pursuit of economic gain. Here, if the poor are to be mobilized for collective action, special institutions of the poor, may need to be constructed. Two such institutional arrangements are discussed below:

Corporations of the Poor

Over the last two decades the NGOs have come to play a growing role in most developing countries, principally as delivery agents, contracted by donors to deliver certain services targeted to the poor. Whilst we may argue about their institutional efficacy, systems of accountability and even cost-effectiveness, it is generally accepted that NGOs tend to be more effective in delivering resources directly to the poor than the machinery of state. It has, however, been argued that the emergence of the NGO as an aid contractor, keeps them heavily dependent on aid. This external dependence is increasingly compromising the role of NGO's as social mobilizers and advocates of the poor.

It is suggested that the long term sustainability of the NGO, as a financially autonomous institution of civil society, lies in its reinvention as a corporation of the poor. The future of the NGO as a social institution lies in its ability to use its institutional capacity, which has extended into rural communities across the world, thereby giving them direct access to vast numbers of the poor, to use this reach to link the poor to the market. This can be done through transforming NGOs into corporations of the poor, where their micro-beneficiaries are transformed into the owners of a corporate NGO. Through such a measure, the individual weakness of the poor could be aggregated into the legally recognized power of the many. Initially only a small number of NGOs would have the organizational capacity and resources to evolve into nationally competitive corporate bodies. However, smaller NGOs can also evolve into more modest corporate entities. Even a single village based NGO could evolve into a small enterprise which could mobilize the poor to own the village pond, build and maintain rural roads or trade in commodities produced or consumed by the poor.

This suggested reconfiguration of the NGO's would also make them accountable to their myriad owners. Such an institutional transformation could lay to rest the critique of NGOs that they are accountable only to their donors and perpetuate the patron-client system which they were designed to challenge. An NGO owned by and accountable to two million members or even 2000 members could emerge as a socially powerful organization at the national or local level with no less social legitimacy than a representative institution.

Community based organizations of the poor

The NGOs are not the only agency for forging collective solidarity within the poor. Community based or self-help organizations of the poor, cooperatives and activity based organizations, which bring groups of the poor together, should aspire to forge an institutional identity. 6991 community based organizations (CBO), covering 132,000 households, have been organized in 6 countries of South Asia under the *South Asian Programme of Poverty Alleviation (SAPAP)* to jointly undertake savings and investment. In Pakistan, the *National Rural Support Project* has organized 11,000 community organizations with 241,000 members to participate in similar community actions in their village. In the state of the Andhra Pradesh the World Bank is assisting a programme for reducing poverty which plans to socially mobilize 5 million of the rural poor in CBOs to collectively participate in economic activity.

Corporitising these CBOs will provide the legal foundations for collective action, to enable these bodies of the poor to access credit, enter into contractual relationships and deal with international organizations. The precise legal persona of these corporations may vary from limited liability companies, with the poor as equity owners, to cooperatives with the poor as partner members. But the common feature of all such corporate entities of the poor is that they must operate in the market place and generate income rather than limiting themselves to survive as savings and loan associations.

Empowering the poor

The entire process of building a collective identity for the poor through specially constructed institutions, derives from the need for the poor to claim a place in society which is more commensurate with their numbers. The poor remain disempowered because they are isolated. Bring them together and they emerge as a major force in the

economy, in society and eventually in the political arena. Incorporating the poor, around opportunities for collective economic benefit, may invest them with a sustainable sense of solidarity which may not have been possible through more episodic participation in various class actions. However, in the final analysis, it is only when the poor are sitting in the representative institutions of the state, in local elective bodies as well as in Parliament, that they will be able to ensure that their special concerns will be mainstreamed within the policymaking process.

It is argued that a society populated by a large number of corporate bodies of the poor, bound together by opportunities for economic gain, could aggregate into a powerful political force which could transform the balance of power in many parts of the developing world. This vision, however, lies in the distant future and we should not tantalise ourselves with the prospect of instant social transformation. The purpose of including the issue of empowering the poor in this paper is to spell out a broad continuum for policy action. This approach demands a change in perspective from poverty alleviation to poverty eradication through structural change.

It is unlikely that many governments in the developing world would be inclined to rush towards building up institutions of the poor to a point where the balance of power in society could be transformed. Our discussions should, thus, not be built upon an innocence of the discipline of political economy. Building up the collective power of the poor whether of 2 million members or 200 members in a village will challenge existing vested interests at different levels. Any serious discussion of the empowering effect of collective action will, therefore, have to contextualize the outcome of this process within its given socio-political environment in a country. This recognition of political reality should not however serve as a refuge for business as usual. All social action builds upon testing the limits of commitment and tolerance of state and society. Thus, those governments who do have a genuine commitment to eradicate poverty may accommodate some measures of institutional change as for example by encouraging the emergence of a Mutual Fund for the poor or promoting community based organizations. In South Asia, for example, most governments have accepted the idea of expanding the coverage of CBOs, as an instrument for rural development. But such ideas have to be developed as politically marketable proposals and have to be tested not just on their intellectual merits but have to mobilize social and political constituencies in their support.

We must, furthermore, keep in mind that neither the concept of building corporations of the poor or the Mutual Fund depend exclusively on the government for its advancement. NGOs are at liberty to reconstruct their corporate identity as are the poor to organize themselves though in some countries such a process may require enabling legislation. Here, the international development community can help to accelerate such a process of empowering the poor, by redirecting their aid programmes towards both encouraging the emergence as well as enabling corporate bodies of the poor to acquire wealth. This could require provision of resources to support acquisition of land, water bodies, leveraging purchase of shares, building capacity to compete in the market, and enhancing the knowledge base of the poor, particularly to participate in the IT revolution. Indeed, all such programmes could themselves derive from a new generation of locally owned structural adjustment reforms, premised on the empowerment of the poor. However, such initiatives will depend on whether governments in the developed world, particularly those with an apparently strong commitment to poverty reduction and international institutions with similar commitments are willing to strike at the roots of poverty or will remain committed to business as usual.

There is little in this paper which could be regarded as particularly radical. Neither Mutual Funds or corporations of the poor should raise the spectre of the barricades. However, when such an argument is viewed within an holistic policy framework it does represent a change in the direction of the agenda for poverty eradication, away from narrow programmes of income gain for the poor to their empowerment through collective action for economic gain and social advancement. It is hoped that the ideas articulated in this paper will encourage more substantive work and public debate on the need for and direction of structural change in the developing and transitional societies which may encourage rethinking among their policymakers as well as some forward looking international institutions.