

# Study on the Poor and Poverty

Pastor Winston

**“THE POOR YOU WILL ALWAYS HAVE WITH YOU” (Matthew 26:11).**

*“OUR FIRST TASK IN APPROACHING ANOTHER PEOPLE, ANOTHER CULTURE, ANOTHER RELIGION IS TO TAKE OFF OUR SHOES FOR THE PLACE WE ARE APPROACHING IS HOLY ELSE WE MAY FIND OURSELVES TREADING ON ANOTHER’S DREAM. MORE SERIOUSLY STILL WE MAY FORGET THAT GOD WAS THERE BEFORE OUR ARRIVAL.”*

## BIASES OF PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT WORKER

Conditioning. Every development worker is a conditioned human being . The temptation to transfer our view of how things work and what will make things better is very powerful.

Dominance. All of us have within us the desire to feel superior or dominant over others. The fact that we can read, express ourselves clearly and effectively when we speak, write things down, reduce complex problems to diagrams, come in a car or a motorcycle, ask for a meeting with important people and get it, all communicate a position of power and privilege that we can unwittingly assume as part of who we are.

Distance. Development professionals often work at a distance, geographically and psychologically. When we are with the poor we are “in the field”; our office is in the city where we have access to email, fax, and telephone, where we can “get things done.” We know the poor only at a distance.

Denial. When the real world of the poor conflicts with who we are or how we are trained or what we believe, the reaction can too often be denial. We simply reframe or recompose the discordant experience. This all-too-human reaction allows us to remain untroubled and unchanged, leaving the poor to adapt to us.

CHRISTIAN VIEWS OF THE POOR

<b>View of the Poor</b>	<b>Theological Frame</b>	<b>Key Biblical Texts</b>	<b>Expressions</b>	<b>Why the Poor are poor</b>	<b>Christian Response</b>
Poor made in the image of God	Creation	Genesis 1-2	Poor as creative. Poor as a work of art. See God's hidden glory	The poor lack skills, knowledge, and opportunity	enable the poor to be fruitful and productive.
Poor as people in rebellion	Fall	Genesis 3 Proverbs	Poor as lazy. Poor make bad choices. God helps those who help themselves	The poor are in rebellion and their culture keeps them poor.	Challenge the poor with the gospel and encourage them to make better choices.
Poor as Christ incarnate	Incarnation	Gospels	Christ in the distressing guise of the poor. What you did for the least of these...	The poor lack love.	Accompany the poor and relieve sufferings as possible.
Poor as God's favorites	Prophetic Eschatological	Exodus Prophets	Blessed are the poor for theirs will be the kingdom. Liberation theology	The poor are oppressed by the non-poor. Poverty is structural	Work for justice. Help the poor find their vice and place in socio-political-economic system
Poor as lost souls	Salvation Soteriological	Matthew 28 Acts	The better future lies in eternity. Save as many as we can. The poor will always be with you.	The poor are lost from God, and the kingdom is coming soon.	Proclaim the gospel and encourage the poor to respond.

*Poor as made in the image of God.* This view draws on the creation narrative and tends toward a romantic view of the poor. Their poverty is the result of lack of skills and opportunity. What they need is a “leg up.”

*Poor as people in rebellion.* This view draws on the fall as the defining reason why the poor are poor. They are lazy and they make bad choices.

*Poor as Christ Incarnate.* Drawing on Matthew 25, this view of the poor centers on the Incarnation and sees Christ in the distressing guise of the poor.

*Poor as God’s favorites.* This view draws on the prophetic literature and the Exodus account. The poor are the ones who are blessed, for their will be the kingdom. They are poor because they are oppressed by social systems that keep them poor for the benefit of the non-poor.

*Poor as lost souls.* This view draws selectively on the gospels and reflects the dichotomy between the spiritual and the physical of the modern world. The poor are lost, and they need to be saved.

## **WHO ARE THE POOR?**

The poor are people, and we must begin there. The poor are whole, living people, inseparably body, soul, mind, and heart. They are persons embedded in families, communities, and the corresponding social systems. They are made in the image of God and thus gave gifts, skills, and the potential to become kingdom-like, just as we do.

They live in households. Households exercise three kinds of power:

- *Social power* dealing with access to information, knowledge and skills, participation in social organizations and access to financial resources.
- *Political power* dealing with access to the process by which decisions affecting their future are made.
- *Psychological power* dealing with a sense of individual potency or self-confident behavior.

## **The poor and the non-poor**

We cannot talk about who the poor are without pointing out the fact that they are always among others who are not poor. Even in the poorest communities, there is a small group who are less poor and who occupy positions of relative power and privilege. In any area there is always a small group of communities that are not poor in relation to the other communities in the area. Even in the household unit this is true; there is usually a dominant man who is not poor in comparison to the rest of the household. Therefore, poverty and the poor can only be understood by keeping the relationships between the poor and the non-poor clearly in mind.

## **Who the poor are not**

Some say the poor are lazy, fatalistic, ignorant and will not save for the future. The poor may not save, but this may be for the good reason that their survival today will not permit it. The poor may appear lazy, but what we may be seeing is their way of conserving limited physical energy. Fatalism may be an adaptation that is prudent, not a giving up. The appearance of powerlessness, unawareness and acquiescence may be a condition for survival.

The depth and breadth of their indigenous knowledge frequently astounds us. Their knowledge of local ecology, traditional medicine, and survival skills is considerable. The poor can survive in conditions that would daunt the non-poor.

The poor are no more lazy, fatalistic, improvident, stupid, or arrogant than anyone else. All people suffer from these problems, poor and non-poor alike. But only the non-poor can afford to indulge in these behaviors. People so close to the edge cannot afford laziness or stupidity. They have to work and work hard, whenever and however they can.

### **Which poor?**

The poor are not a homogenous category, and poverty is different for different groups. Poverty means different things to children and youth, to women, to the mentally and physically challenged, and to the old.

Children and youth are often an underutilized development resource. Too often they are viewed as helpless, vulnerable, and in need of care. In a sense, we have a mental model that says that the poverty of children is complete; they are simply poor and have nothing to contribute. This makes them all the poorer. We are always tempted to “do for” children, not recognizing the potential for transformation that children represent.

The poor are often women, and the poverty of women is both a special concern and a special opportunity. UN Statistics: women perform two thirds of the world's work, earn one-tenth of the world's income, are two-thirds of the world's illiterate, and own less than one-hundredth of the world's property. There is a great deal of documentation that shows that women and young girls get less schooling, have poorer nutrition, and receive less healthy care. The poverty of women is physical, spiritual, and social.

However, there is a body of research that shows that female literacy is a positive predictor of many good things—lower fertility, lower child mortality, and successful micro-enterprise development.

## **WHAT IS POVERTY?**

### **Poverty as deficit**

Poor people do not have enough to eat, a place to sleep, or clean water. Their land is poor, there is no water for irrigation, roads are inadequate, and there are no schools for their children. This view of poverty encourages plans to provide the missing things: food, low-cost housing, wells. The unspoken assumption is that when the missing things are provided, the poor will no longer be poor.

Another kind of deficit has to do with things people do not know or skills they do not have. Poor people may not understand poor nutrition, the need to boil water, the importance of child spacing, how to read the instructions on a packet of improved seeds. They don't know about sustainable agriculture, running small businesses, the importance of saving money. This view of poverty invites programming that features education and nonformal learning. It assumes that if the poor simply learn enough, they will not be poor.

If poverty is the absence of things, then the solution is to provide them. This often leads to the outsider becoming the development “Santa Claus,” bringing all good things. The poor are seen as passive recipients, incomplete human beings we make complete and whole through our largess. This unwitting attitude has two very negative consequences.

*First*, this attitude demeans and devalues the poor. Our view of them, which quickly becomes their view of themselves, is that they are defective and inadequate. We do not treat them as human beings made in the image of God. We act as if God’s gifts were given to us and none to the poor. This attitude increases their poverty and tempts us to play god in the lives of the poor.

*Second*, our attitude about ourselves can become messianic. We are tempted to believe that we are the deliverers of the poor, that we make their lives complete. We can inadvertently harbor a belief that we are the ones who save. Such an attitude is not good for our souls.

### **Poverty as entanglement**

Chambers said that the poor are living in a “cluster of disadvantage.” Physically weak, isolated, vulnerable and powerless, the poor find themselves in an interactive system called “poverty trap.”

What are the parts of this system:

1. **Material poverty:** The household has few assets. Its housing and sanitation is inadequate. It has little or no land, livestock, or wealth.
2. **Physical weakness:** The household members are weak. They lack strength because of poor health and inadequate nutrition. Many in the household are women, the very young, and the very old.
3. **Isolation:** The household lacks access to services and information. It is often remote – far from main roads, water lines, and even electricity. It lacks access to markets, capital, credit, and information.
4. **Vulnerability:** The household has few buffers against emergencies or disaster. Its members lack choices and options. They are vulnerable to cultural demands such as dowry and feast days, that soak up their savings.
5. **Powerlessness:** The household lacks the ability and the knowledge to influence the life around it and the social systems in which it lives.
6. **Spiritual poverty:** The household suffers from broken and dysfunctional relationships with God, the community, each other, and creation.

### **FOUR ELEMENTS THAT CONTRIBUTE TO VULNERABILITY OF POOR HOUSEHOLDS:**

1. Social conventions such as dowry, bride price, feast days, weddings, and funerals
2. Natural or manmade disasters expose vulnerability. The poor have no reserves, and disasters push them to do things they might not wish to do, such as sell land and livestock.
3. Physical incapacity – sickness, childbearing, and accidents-reveals vulnerability
4. Unproductive expenditures for things like drink, drugs, unproductive assets like radios, shoes, or clothes, and poor business investments.
5. Exploitation that takes advantage of vulnerability.

Chambers points out that powerlessness is often overlooked because it is discomforting to the powerful, even to development practitioners.

Powerlessness is an invitation to exploitation by the powerful.

### **3 Clusters of Exploitation**

1. The local non-poor often stand as *nets* between the poorer people and the outside world by trapping resources and benefits that were intended for the poor.
2. Robbery, the local non-poor-police, politicians, and landowners-use deception, blackmail, and violence to rob the poor who, in turn, lack recourse to justice, "since they do not know the law, cannot afford legal help and fear to offend the patrons on whom they depend.
3. Bargaining and its absence. The assets of the poor are bought at far below market value because of distress sales. The poor borrow at exorbitant rates, even when less costly options are available, because they fear that alienating the local money lender may lead to a lack of credit in the future.
4. Powerlessness is not just a problem the poor have with the material world and the non-poor who live in it. The poor often live in fear of the unseen spiritual world of curses, gods, demons, and ancestors. Physical weakness is often associated with spiritual causes. Isolation from God and the Bible is significant as not having access to government services, markets, and capital.

#### **Poverty as lack of access to social power**

Poor households are excluded and need to be empowered.

Excluded from state-the core of the state consists of the formal executive and judicial elements of government.

political community-the core of the political community consists of independent political organizations.

civil society-the core of civil society is the household

corporate economy-The central institution of the corporate economy is the corporation. This domain is also open to and profoundly interconnected with the global economy and transnational corporations. (page 9)

Absolute poverty for Friedman is when the values for these eight dimensions are too low for a household to be able to move out of poverty on its own.

Poverty then is caused not simply by local setting, but by a social system that goes beyond the local setting. The role of government, the political system, civil society, and the economy, integrated into the global economy, is now part of the field of play. Poverty is understood as a state of disempowerment.

#### **Poverty as disempowerment(page 12)**

Jayakuman Christian says that the poor are embedded not only in a complex framework of interacting systems, but that these systems also include a personal system, which includes psychology, a spiritual/religious system, which is both personal and social; and a cultural system that includes worldview. The poor find themselves trapped inside a system of disempowerment made up of these interacting systems. Each part of the system creates its own particular contribution to disempowerment of the poor, including what Christian terms captivity to god-complexes of the non-poor, deception by the principalities and powers, inadequacies in worldview, and suffering from a marred identity.

## Captivity to god-complexes of the non-poor – the socio-economic-political system

According to Christian, the non-poor express their god-complexes by:

- Seeking to absolutize themselves in the lives of the poor.
- Citing the “eternal yesterday” as the justification for influencing the “eternal tomorrow” of the poor. “It has always been this way.”
- Influencing areas of life that are beyond their scope of influence (e.g., the landlord choosing the names of the children or deciding who will marry whom).
- Claiming immutability for their power over the poor. There will never be power sharing.
- Interacting with other non-poor, safeguarding and enhancing each other’s power.

This captivity finds its concrete expression in the interactive working of the social, political, economic, religious, and cultural systems, resulting in a web of lies and deceit. Furthermore, this systemic captivity has many levels. The local police, landowners, and religious leaders form the micro-expression of the lowest level of this disempowering system. They, in turn, are linked to and usually subservient to business, political, and judicial leaders at the regional and national levels.

This is the macro-level of the god-complexes. These are embedded in global systems represented by transnational corporations, international financial institutions (world bank, IMF, etc.), the UN system, and the like, who also play god in the lives of the poor, albeit from a far distance.

All these levels exist within a cosmic system in which the principalities and powers work out their rebellion against God and God’s intentions for human life in creation.

### *Deception by principalities and powers – the spiritual system*

The powerlessness of the poor is reinforced by fear and deceit created by the “god of this age that has blinded the minds of unbelievers” (2 Cor 4:4) and the “trap of the devil who has taken them captive to do his will” (2 Tim 2:26). Both the poor and the non-poor are “in slavery under the basic principles of the world” (Gal 4:3)

The primary expression of this deception is through the ideological center or inner reality of the systems, structures, and legitimating narratives through which the non-poor play god in the lives of the poor. But there is a deeper truth as well. Christian is also affirming that it is not simply human beings, and the systems within which they live, that create and sustain poverty. There is a cosmic adversary who is working against life. This adversary is “a liar and the father of lies” (Jn 8:44) Any account that ignores the reality of an Evil One lacks the full explanatory power that the Bible offers.

### *Inadequacies in worldview – the cultural system*

Christian points to the disempowering idea of *karma*, (*gaba*) which teaches the poor that their current state is a just response to their former life and something that must be accepted if they hope for a better life the next time around. When the poor are invited to try to change their present condition, their worldview tells them they are being invited to sin.

The Brahmin are taught by their Hindu tradition that they were made from the head of God and so are supposed to rule. The haridjan are taught that they were made from the lower parts of god and thus are

inferior by nature. Every culture has beliefs that disempowers people, discourage change, and label oppressive relationships as sacrosanct and ordained.

*Weakness in mind, body, and spirit – the biophysical system*

The biophysical system – mind, body and spirit-is diminished by poverty and powerlessness results of hunger, illness, and lack of education. Undernourished, sick, and weak bodies and minds are easy homes for captivity to god-complexes, deception, and inadequate worldviews.

*The marred identity of the poor – the personal system*

Christian concludes his explanation of poverty by pointing out that captivity to go-complexes, deception by principalities and powers, and inadequacies in worldview result in a tragic marring of the identity of the poor.

The identity of the poor s marred in two important ways.

First, the poor are systematically excluded as actors. Too often the voice of the poor is regarded as “damaged goods”. The powerful do not expect the poor to have anything to offer, since they have been labeled (usually by the non-poor) as lazy, ignorant, or unworthy.

Second, the lifetime of suffering, deception, and exclusion is internalized by the poor in a way that results n the poor no longer knowing who they truly are or why they were created. This is the deepest and most profound expression of poverty.

The poor come to believe that they are and were always meant to be without value and without gifts.

They believe they are truly god-forsaken.

Poor people feel nonexistent, valueless, humiliated.

When the poor accept their marred identity and their distorted sense of vocation as normative and immutable, their poverty is complete.



## ***The web of lies***

For Christian, the identity of the poor is distorted, and is kept distorted by a "web of lies" that entraps the poor in ways far stronger and insidious than physical bonds or material limitations. These lies are a result of god-complexes, inadequacies in worldview, and deception by principalities and powers.

The all-encompassing web of lies

<b>Theme</b>	<b>Social System</b>	<b>Lie</b>
Captivity to the god-complexes of the non-poor	Social Political Economic Religious	You are outside the social system Your purpose is to serve us. You have no assets, nor should you. We will speak to God on your behalf.
Marred identity of the poor	Social Political Economic Religious	We are not worthy of inclusion. We are not worthy of participation. We have nothing to contribute. We are not worthy of God's concern.
Inadequacies in worldview	Social Political Economic Religious	Our place in the social order is fixed. They are supposed to rule over us. Our poverty is ordained We sinned: God gives us what we deserve
Deception by the principalities	Social Political Economic Religious	Social systems are not for the likes of you. Political systems are not for the likes of you. Economic systems are not for the likes of you. God is not for the likes of you.
Weakness of mind, body, and spirit	Social Political Economic Religious	I'm not smart enough. I'm uneducated. I'm too weak to matter; I have nothing. I can't understand these things anyway.

Along the same lines, Walter Wink has articulated “delusional assumptions” that are accepted uncritically by poor and non-poor alike. The non-poor are socialized into a culture with mythic stories, structures, and systems that make their position of power make sense, even seem ethically defensible. The deception is complete. A partial list of Wink’s delusional assumptions includes:

- The need to prevent social chaos requires that some should dominate others.
- Men are better at being dominant than women; some races are more naturally suited to dominate others.
- A valued end justifies any means.
- Violence is redemptive; it is the only language enemies understand.
- Ruling or managing is the most important social function.
- Rulers and managers are entitled to extra privileges and wealth.
- Those with the greatest military strength, the most advanced technology, the biggest markets, and the most wealth are the ones who will and should survive.
- Production of wealth is more important than production of healthy normal people and sound human relationships.
- Property is sacred and property ownership is an absolute right.
- Institutions are more important than people.
- God, there is a God, is the protector and patron of the powerful.

These delusions are widely believed. They are the way of the world, largely taken for granted by poor and non-poor, Christian and non-Christian alike. The poor, Christian tells us, have internalized a web of lies. The non-poor are no better off. The only difference is that they believe a different set of lies.

### **Poverty as lack of freedom to grow-Ravi Jayakaran**

Ravi Jayakaran, an Indian expert in the use of the participatory Learning and Action methodology and a colleague of Robert Chambers, describes poverty as a lack of freedom to grow. Echoing Luke 2:52, Jayakaran pictures the poor wrapped in a series of restrictions and limitations in four area of life: **physical, mental, social, and spiritual.**

Jayakaran goes on to point out that behind each of these “bundles of limitations” lies powerful stakeholders, people whose interests are served by the limitations and who have a stake in sustaining the illusion that such limitations can never be changed.

We discover these limitations when we ask the critical diagnostic questions: **Who is doing what to whom?**

The micro-expression of these stakeholders is usually local and obvious: money-lenders, local traders and business people, police, government officials, and priests or shamans.

The macro-expressions are often harder to name because they are located elsewhere, usually close to where decisions affecting the poor are made.

In addition to being harder to find and identify, the higher-level stakeholders usually control the micro-level ones.

According to Jayakaran the causes of poverty are in people not in concepts or abstractions like greed, systems, the market, corruption, and culture.

The stakeholders, the sources of oppression, are often themselves operating within “bundles of limitations” kept in place by still-more-powerful stakeholders.

It is doubtful there is or ever will be a unified theory of poverty. There is always more to see and more to learn. The corrective is to keep using a family of views to see all the things we need to see. We must work hard to be as holistic as we can be for the sake of the poor.

## THE CAUSES OF POVERTY

Our understanding of why people are poor shares our understanding of transformational development, the better human future it seeks, and the methods we must apply to get there.

View of cause	Proposed response
The poor are sinner.	Evangelism and uplift
The poor are sinned against.	Social action; working for justice
The poor lack knowledge.	Education
The poor lack things.	Relief/social welfare
The culture of the poor is flawed.	Become like us; ours is better
The social system makes them poor.	Change the system

Like our understanding of the nature of poverty, our understanding of the causes of poverty tends to be in the eye of the beholder. If care is not taken to understand our unwitting biases, our understanding of the causes of poverty tends to be an outworking of our place in the social system, our education, our culture, and our personality. Our understanding of the causes of poverty also depends on where we start looking at poverty, and more important, where we stop looking. (page 23)

For example, if we are only concerned with needs, we will only see lack of water. Without further thought, lack of water is the cause of poverty and providing water is the answer. However, behind needs are issues, such as ownership of the water. If this is the cause of the lack of water, then the response is to work on ownership or access. Behind issues there are structures, such as caste, that influence who get access to water, and which often create insurmountable barriers to access. Behind structures are groups who inhabit and enforce the structures by insisting that “it is our water and our right to control its use.”

Behind these groups are the ideologies and values that inform the group and shape the social structure, the unspoken assumptions that “we are to be served and they are subhuman and aren’t supposed to drink where we drink.” This is worldview.

Extreme: Sometimes this kind of analysis results in the development practitioner ignoring the immediate need and instead going single-mindedly after the underlying causes.

### The nature of poverty is fundamentally relational

This is the point of departure: Poverty is a result of relationships that do not work, that are not just, that are not for life, that are not harmonious or enjoyable. Poverty is the absence of shalom in all its meanings. All four poverty frameworks provide explanations that rest on the idea of relationships that are fragmented, dysfunctional, or oppressive.

Chamber's poverty trap, Friedman's access to social power, Christian's framework for disempowerment, and Jayakaran's lack of opportunities to grow, all have at their foundation relationships that lack shalom, that work against well-being, against life and life abundant.

At the center of this relational understanding of poverty is the idea of the poor not knowing who they are or the reason for which they were created. When people believe they are less than human, without the brains, strength, and personhood to contribute to their own well-being or that of others, their understanding of who they are is marred.

### **The cause of poverty is fundamentally spiritual**

What causes this distortion and injustice in our relationships? What stands between us and God? What divides us inside ourselves into competing, conflicting vices? What separates us within our community, with some doing well and others suffering? What causes us to exclude and sometimes demonize the "other"? Why do we abuse the earth? What is it that works against life, against shalom? The answers to these questions provide us with an explanation of the causes of poverty. Any theory of poverty must have answers.

For the Christian, the biblical story provides an unambiguous answer. Sin is what distorts these relationships. Sin is the root cause of deception, distortion, and domination. When God is on the sidelines or written out of our story, we do not treat each other well.

Why does the poverty trap work as it does? Why are the poor denied access to social power? What is at the root of the web of lies and the disempowerment that results? Why are there constraints to growth, with a group of people standing behind each limitation and restriction? Because of deceptive and dominating relationships, because we are unable to love God and neighbor, because of sin. We work for what we think life is for. We try to provide our own abundant life. Without a strong theology of sin, comprehensive explanations for poverty are hard to come by.

One other point, a hard thing to say. If it is true that sin is the fundamental cause of our lack of shalom, of our world of dominating relationships, then there is good news and bad news. The good news is that through Jesus Christ there is a way out of sin toward transformation. The bad news is that if this news is not accepted, there is a sense in which those who refuse sit wrapped in chains of self-imposed limitations.

For the Christian development worker, there is an obvious implication. There can be no practice of transformational development that is Christian unless somewhere, in some form, people are hearing the good news of the gospel and being given a chance to respond. How one does this in a sensitive, appropriate, and non-coercive way is also very important.

Too little or too much could be dangerous.

Proverbs 30:8-9

Give me neither poverty nor riches, but give me only my daily bread. Otherwise, I may have too much and disown you and say, "Who is the Lord?" Or I may become poor and steal, and so dishonor the name of my God.