

## **Welcome to Journal *Academics Stand Against Poverty***

**Thomas Pogge<sup>1</sup>**

### **Abstract:**

Though it has academics in the title, our new journal isn't especially academic. Its main purpose is practical: to help reduce poverty around the world. Doing so is often seen as technical work for experts in disciplines like engineering, agriculture, pharmacology and economics. But this task also has a large moral and political component. Poor people typically have little political influence and social visibility. And if the rest of us care little about poverty eradication, then not much effort by those experts will be devoted to it.

After presenting the new journal's mission, the bulk of this paper introduces poverty as a subject of constructive academic attention. It does so under five main headings: definition, description, explanation, moral assessment and eradication. At the end, the other essays in this inaugural issue are briefly presented.

**Keywords:** Academia, Assessment, Definition, Description, Eradication, Explanation, Global South, Hunger, Poverty, Sustainable Development Goals, Undernourishment.

This journal is dedicated to poverty—and to those who must live with it. It is meant to help and to inspire academics to bring their special skills and resources to bear on this problem and thereby to make poverty more vivid, more understandable and more tractable. ASAP-J gives voice to academics and experts, especially ones from the global South, who stand with the poor: who, through well-grounded analysis, critique and reforms of the *status quo* seek to contribute to the eradication—as soon as possible—of poverty and its associated evils. To do this successfully, ASAP-J needs participation also by non-academics who substantially deal with poverty in their personal or professional lives. They are welcome as authors, reviewers, readers and editorial staff volunteers.

ASAP-J extends and complements the work of the registered non-profit organization *Academics Stand Against Poverty* (US EIN 32-0324998) which, taking advantage of a well-entrenched global infrastructure of institutions of research and learning, has been facilitating poverty-focused academic cooperation for over a decade.<sup>2</sup> ASAP-J supports such collaborative work with mutual learning and seeks to include scholars and experts from poorer countries, from non-elite educational institutions and also from non-educational organizations, agencies and

---

<sup>1</sup> Having received his PhD in philosophy from Harvard, Thomas Pogge is Leitner Professor of Philosophy and International Affairs and founding Director of the Global Justice Program at Yale ([globaljustice.yale.edu](http://globaljustice.yale.edu)). He co-founded Academics Stand Against Poverty, an international network aiming to enhance the impact of scholars, teachers and students on global poverty ([www.academicsstand.org](http://www.academicsstand.org)), and Incentives for Global Health, a team effort toward creating new incentives that would improve access to advanced pharmaceuticals worldwide ([www.healthimpactfund.org](http://www.healthimpactfund.org)). More information at <https://campuspress.yale.edu/thomaspogge/>.

<sup>2</sup> See [www.academicsstand.org](http://www.academicsstand.org); Pogge and Cabrera (2012).

communities dedicated to poverty eradication. Aiming for the widest possible reach, it will always be freely accessible in electronic form, without any requirement to provide personal information. There will never be a cost to our readers or authors. To sustain itself and to safeguard its focus and quality, ASAP-J will depend on volunteer work and occasional donations from friends around the world. These committed supporters are more than friends of the journal, they *are* the journal: working together toward making it succeed in its mission.

International and multidisciplinary, ASAP-J publishes two regular issues per year plus occasional special issues that may be proposed by or to potential guest editors. Regular issues will feature original work on poverty-relevant subjects in the form of research essays, review papers, research notes, reports, book reviews, opinions and letters.<sup>3</sup> All submissions receive rigorous and timely peer review and constructive critique to ensure high quality and to assist authors in making their work clear, broadly accessible and practically useful. Journal ASAP is registered under ISSN 2690-3458 (electronic edition) and ISSN 2690-3431 (print edition).

The remainder of this welcome essay gives an overview and a taste of the kinds of constructive work on poverty that ASAP-J seeks to promote, and then presents the authors and essays of our inaugural issue.

### **Approaching the Subject of Poverty**

Constructive reflections on poverty work on the *definition* of poverty, its *description* in both quantitative (incidence, geographical distribution and evolution over time) and qualitative terms, the *causal explanation* of such data and trends, the *moral assessment* of poverty with ascription of normative responsibility and the *eradication* of poverty. ASAP-J will cover all five of these components in the interest of promoting a clear, reason-based understanding of poverty that can be a solid basis for institutional reforms, policies and citizen initiatives.

In doing such work together, we must bear in mind that poverty is an eminently practical subject matter. By affecting how people think about poverty, one can influence their conduct and hence legislation, policies and social practices. Accordingly, much about poverty is contested, as people—consciously or otherwise—adapt their understandings of poverty in the service of gaining political support for, or discrediting, some group or ideology. Such biases and controversies are wide-ranging, involving all five of the mentioned components.

One response to this insight might be a quest for an unbiased, neutral and objective analysis of poverty. But such an analysis is a mirage. While there may be scientifically justifiable definitions of gold and of energy, for example, the same cannot be said for poverty. How we define it depends on the specific purpose for which we intend to use this definition and on the context in which it is to be deployed; and even when purpose and context are given, there are still various plausible options. The alternative to ideology and manipulation here is not some immaculate objectivity, but rather transparency with open discussion.

The five components are interdependent in various ways. Definition is linked to assessment: if poverty is morally regrettable, then its definition should not include people who could easily raise their low level of expenditure but prefer a frugal lifestyle. Description is linked

---

<sup>3</sup> See <http://journalasap.org/index.php/asap/about/submissions> for details on these options.

to definition insofar as at least a rough working definition is needed to identify the phenomena to be described. Their detailed description—including, in particular, interviews and consultations with poor people—can then lead to a sharper, richer definition. Explanation is linked to description insofar as it presupposes good descriptions of the phenomena to be explained (*explananda*) as well as of the phenomena invoked to explain them (*explanantes*). Assessment is linked to explanation insofar as causal involvement is presupposed in attributions of moral responsibility. Eradication strategies are linked to explanations insofar as they must be causally effective in changing factors that produce or perpetuate poverty. Insofar as they rely on moral arguments, such strategies may also be linked to moral assessment, making special demands perhaps on those who have contributed to, or benefited from, poverty-producing wrongs or injustices.

### Defining Poverty

A very basic definition might be: *poverty is a trait of persons and groups; they are poor insofar as they lack secure access to essentials for a worthwhile life.*

To be useable as a criterion that can determine who is poor and how poor they are, this definition must be specified in various respects. The best way of doing so depends on *context* and *purpose*. A historical study of the evolution of poverty in Indonesian provinces under Suharto should employ a different specification than the administration of a child credit for poor families in Bulgaria in the 2020s. In both cases, the specification may reasonably take into account what data are available and the cost of obtaining additional data. In the latter case, incentive effects also need to be considered—things that Bulgarian families might do to become, or to appear to be, eligible for the credit. Clearly, there is not one correct specification of poverty to be employed regardless of population, purpose, historical period and geographical location.

It is nonetheless useful to discuss the space in which such specification takes place. The proposed basic definition suggests that poverty is *multidimensional*, as several goods are essential for a worthwhile human life. A fuller definition would need to specify these goods—perhaps including nutrition, shelter, air, water, education, health care, leisure time and freedom from violence among others.

The proposed definition further suggests that freedom from poverty is *scalar*, a matter of degree, and also *satiabile*, such that it is in principle attainable by people having secure access to all essentials for a worthwhile life. This accords with ordinary language and common sense: some people are poorer than others, and some people are not poor at all.

To be sure, it is possible to define poverty so that even the richest human beings would still be poor on account of things that even they cannot have, do or be. So-conceived, poverty would be a trait akin to shortness or tallness: even the shortest person is tall by having a certain height (and being taller than a hedgehog), and even the tallest people are short by being shorter than they might be (and shorter than a giraffe). One might be tempted toward such a definition of poverty as unlimited by the thought that any limit must be, to some extent, artificial and arbitrary. Whatever line we may want to draw between the poor and the non-poor, a tiny change that gets a person or household across this line cannot credibly be said to be of inherently much greater significance than other small changes that occur entirely within or outside that limit. But this implication is easily avoided once we define poverty as scalar, a matter of degree. To illustrate.

Suppose we define calorie-poverty in such a way that some particular person must ingest  $N$  kcal per day in order to avoid it, and suppose we then assess the severity of her calorie-poverty as proportional to the square of her proportional calorie shortfall:  $(N-D)^2/N$ , where  $D$  is her daily calorie intake. Such a definition of calorie poverty avoids any suggestion that the cut-off  $N$  has much significance—in fact, this definition attaches *greater* significance to any caloric gain below  $N$  (e.g., from  $N-25$  to  $N-15$ ) than to an equally large caloric gain spanning the threshold (e.g., from  $N-5$  to  $N+5$ ).

Any full expansion of the basic definition would have to specify scalarity and satiability in at least five respects. First, there is the *quality and acceptability* of goods in each dimension. For instance, food varies in the nutrients it provides; and some foodstuffs taste awful or cause physical discomfort, while others are locally disliked or rejected for religious, moral or more broadly cultural reasons. A full specification would need to address these facts in order to enable judgments about whether a particular person's food supply covers the essentials and, if not, how severely it falls short. Second, there is the *quantity* of goods in various dimensions, which may be fully sufficient or insufficient to a greater or lesser extent. Third, there is *access*: a household clearly has access to clean water when it is available through a working tap within its dwelling, but water may be less accessible, as when it must be fetched from a river via a steep and unsafe two-kilometer footpath. Fourth, there is *security* of access: a household's access to nutrition or health care may be solid and reliable—or it may be more or less insecure on account of a member's precarious employment and/or the vagaries of severe weather events.

The first four respects of specification apply separately in each dimension of poverty, determining whether people suffer a relevant shortfall in this dimension and, if so, how severe this shortfall is. The fifth respect looks holistically across the dimensions. Doing so is important to reveal cases where a household has full access to each of the essentials but not to all of them together, as when low income compels a choice between buying needed food or needed fuel. It is important also for gauging the depth of poverty by identifying those who are deprived in multiple dimensions. Arguably, a population has a more grievous poverty problem if the groups suffering given shortfalls in food, shelter, health care etc. heavily overlap than if they are largely disjoint. One might even deny that persons suffering minor shortfalls in only one or two dimensions should count as poor at all.

It is possible to compress all this complexity into a single scale indicating the overall degree of poverty of a person or household or group. Such exercises in aggregation are at least somewhat arbitrary in the formulas and weights they employ to construct this unified scale. This obvious arbitrariness draws skeptical attention to any such aggregation exercise, to investigate whether it is robust, that is, leads to similar results as would have been reached by using a different plausible aggregation instead. Such arbitrariness has led some scholars to prefer a so-called dashboard approach that rejects any effort to aggregate information from different dimensions into one unified measure of overall poverty. The reasons to shun aggregation are not, however, reasons to discard information about correlations across dimensions: any serious study of poverty must pay attention to the extent to which various relevant shortfalls—food poverty, water poverty, shelter poverty, health care poverty—are concentrated in the same households or groups, as, of course, they typically are.

Further specification of the proposed basic definition of poverty must incorporate how the essentials for a worthwhile life vary across persons, depending on their particular needs and circumstances. Four factors affecting their individual requirements are their *natural constitution and endowments*, including size, gender and metabolism,<sup>4</sup> their *necessary work*, which co-determines what food and clothing they need to make their living,<sup>5</sup> their *natural surroundings*, which may expose them to special clothing and shelter needs, and their *social environment*, which may impose certain prerequisites for social acceptance.<sup>6</sup>

This last idea of *social poverty*: lacking access to prerequisites for social acceptance, is distinct from the more common notion of *relative poverty*: being poorer than most others in one's society or community. Social poverty involves the further element of social stigmatization. Relative poverty is often defined simply in terms of some fraction of the relevant population, such as the poorest decile. So-defined, relative poverty falls outside the scope of the proposed basic definition because belonging to the poorest decile is perfectly consistent with having secure access to all the essentials for a worthwhile life, social needs included. The same is true of other relative-poverty concepts, such as living on less than half the median income. Such notions of relative poverty are not relevant to the focus on poverty but fall under the concept of *inequality* which, unlike that of poverty, does not involve the meaning element of being morally regrettable. There is nothing morally regrettable about the—inevitable—fact that 10% of any population are within its poorest decile.

Even if relative poverty is not genuine poverty, it may affect our moral assessment of genuine poverty. Suppose that, in some society, a third of the population lives in absolute poverty. And suppose the rest of society is getting ever more affluent while the situation of the poorest third remains unchanged. In this scenario, the poor are not getting poorer, but their poverty does become morally ever more objectionable because ever more easily avoidable.

This point is relevant to the definition of poverty, which should capture the core meaning elements of the word as commonly used. One central meaning element characterizes poverty as morally regrettable, which means that it would be morally better if (holding other things equal) there were less poverty. This in turn strongly suggests that agents have *pro tanto* moral reason to work toward reducing and eradicating poverty insofar as they can. This reason may not be decisive all things considered: agents' moral duties to make poverty reduction efforts depend on how much such efforts could achieve, and at what cost to themselves and to their other commitments. Thus, poverty, even severe poverty, may exist without moral fault in past or present conduct, practices or institutional arrangements. A context of high socio-economic inequality indicates, however, that existing poverty is not fault-free in this way. In such a context, it is highly

---

<sup>4</sup> Thus, bigger people need more calories, and women need a roughly 70% higher intake of iron than men do (roughly 14.8 versus 8.7 mg/day) in order to avoid iron deficiency (anemia).

<sup>5</sup> Hard physical labor can raise calorie consumption up to threefold.

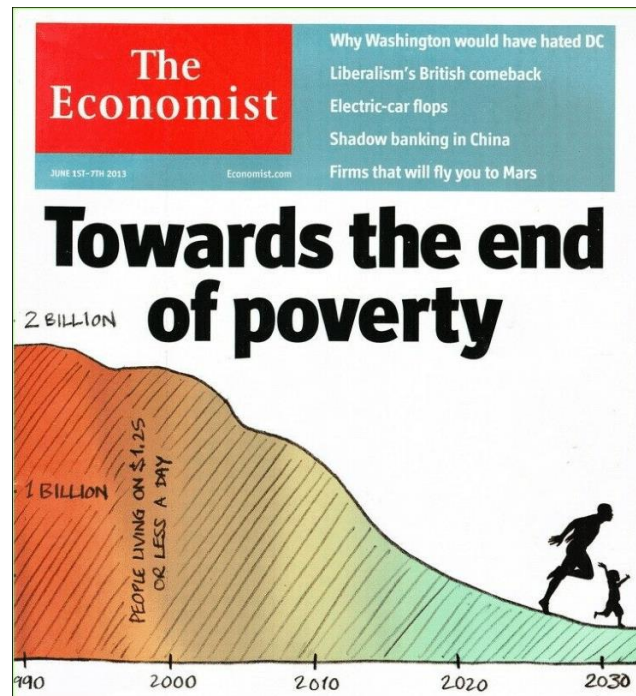
<sup>6</sup> The idea of such social needs and social poverty is clearly articulated by Adam Smith and developed further by Amartya Sen. Smith writes: "in the present times, through the greater part of Europe, a creditable day-laborer would be ashamed to appear in public without a linen shirt, the want of which would be supposed to denote that disgraceful degree of poverty which, it is presumed, nobody can well fall into without extreme bad conduct" (1976, p. 399).

likely that some people are not making the efforts they could and ought to make, at low cost to themselves, toward reducing poverty.

### Describing Poverty

The most authentic descriptions of poverty are communicated by poor people, verbally or in other ways. Through such communications, we learn about common features of poverty and its myriad diverse manifestations. Through such communications and encounters—and also, more indirectly, through stories and novels—poverty becomes salient and commands reflective attention. ASAP-J welcomes such concrete and vivid descriptions, first-hand accounts of the lives of scavengers in India, child laborers in the Congo, domestic servants in Brazil, enslaved fishermen in Thailand or slum dwellers in Nigeria.

Quantitative descriptions of poverty tend to be heavily influenced by the political and ideological biases of their authors and funders. The dominant narrative is one that presents poverty as benign. Defenders of the *status quo* wanting to convey this message tend to define poverty in narrow, minimalist terms and tend to foreground diachronic comparisons between present and past poverty to highlight progress, thereby often focusing on the fraction of people in poverty, rather than their number so as to take advantage of population growth. The most prominent example of such a narrative is the World Bank approach which defines poverty in terms of a household's *per capita* expenditure level converted into US dollars at purchasing power parities. The intended message is well conveyed on the 1 June 2013 cover of *The Economist* magazine showing two ecstatic people escaping poverty by attaining a daily level of consumption that would have cost USD 1.25 in the United States in 2005.



This description of poverty works with an extremely narrow definition of poverty, which includes only a single dimension and suggest that freedom from poverty is achieved at an exceedingly low expenditure level. A person living in the U.S. in 2005—regardless of her metabolism, medical needs, climatic challenges, insecurity of her income and of how long and how hard she must work every day—counts as non-poor provided only that her monthly spending reached USD 38!<sup>7</sup> Use of such an extremely minimalist poverty definition reduces the number of people identified as poor to a bare minimum.

Another problem with the World Bank's approach is that it implicitly assumes that all household members benefit equally from this household's expenditures. This is often not true, as when women and girls are disadvantaged in regard to food and education, for example. A descriptive exercise should be open to the possibility that, even within the same household, some people are poorer than others.

Moreover, the World Bank's description is also biased toward exaggerating the observed decline of poverty. This is so because it works with a definition that excludes social needs, which tend to increase as a society becomes more affluent in aggregate. Further bias results from the empirical fact that the recorded decline in poverty incidence is steeper the lower the poverty line is fixed. In Sub-Saharan Africa between 1990 and 2018, the poverty rate declined by 27% (from 55.15 to 40.39%) or by 8% (from 80.87 to 74.27%), depending on whether one uses the World Bank's poverty line or a more plausible line set at twice its level.<sup>8</sup>

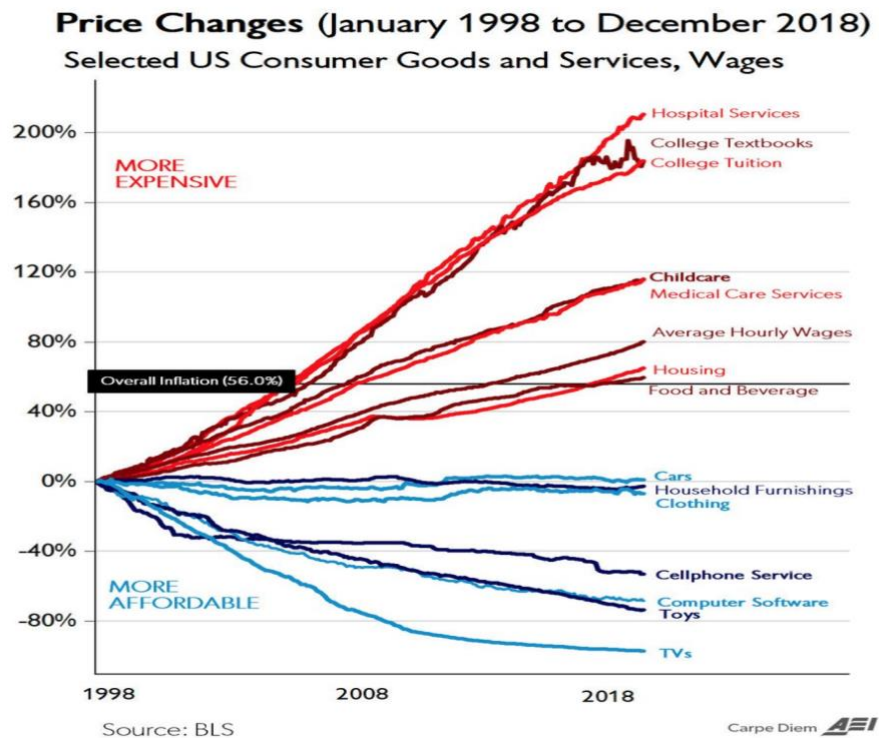
Finally, the World Bank's approach also relies on dubious currency conversions. To determine the poverty status of some given household in some particular year, this household's consumption expenditure in that year must first be converted into local currency units of the base year (2011) and then be further converted into USD of that same base year. These conversions rely on national consumer price indexes and international purchasing power parities (PPPs), respectively, in which the prices of all goods and services are weighted in proportion to their share in, respectively, national and international consumption expenditure. Using such conversions to assess the expenditures of poor people is problematic because their consumption differs sharply from that of people in general. A poor household's access to food may be steadily falling on account of rising food prices, even while its assessed purchasing power shows no decline thanks to the fact that rising food prices are being offset by falling prices for electronic consumer goods. The nearby graphic shows how a consumer price index can hide very large discrepancies in the evolution of different commodity prices. And an analogous point holds for PPPs, where a conversion rate of USD 1 to INR 25 may hide the fact that, at this conversion rate, food is twice

---

<sup>7</sup> Though meant to cover *all* living expenses, USD 38 was not sufficient even just for food. For the relevant year 2005, the U.S. Department of Agriculture calculated the cost of a "thrifty" nutritionally adequate diet for short-term or emergency use at well over USD 100 per person per month, with the exact amount depending on each household's size and composition. See <https://fns-prod.azureedge.net/sites/default/files/CostofFoodNov05.pdf>.

<sup>8</sup> Since 2013, the World Bank had revised its poverty line from USD 1.25 in 2005 dollars to USD 1.90 in 2011 dollars: a household is counted as poor if its consumption expenditure per person per day has less purchasing power than USD 1.90 had in the United States in 2011. Thus, the example in the text shows how the magnitude of poverty reduction is affected by whether poverty is defined in terms of USD 1.90 or 3.80 (2011) per person per day. All data are from <http://iresearch.worldbank.org/PovcalNet/povOnDemand.aspx#>.

as expensive in India as in the U.S. while services, say, are twice as expensive in the U.S. as in India. When this is so, people living in India on INR 950 per person per month are much poorer than ones living in the U.S. on USD 38 per person per month, even though these two incomes are computed to have the same purchasing power.



Complementing the World Bank's poverty measurement exercise, the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization, in its annual state of food security reports, offers another prominent minimalist description, focused specifically on food poverty. The FAO works with this definition: “*undernourishment*” has been defined as an extreme form of food insecurity, arising when food energy availability is inadequate to cover even minimum needs for a sedentary lifestyle ... lasting over a year” (FAO et al., 2012, p. 50). By focusing solely on “dietary energy intake,” this definition ignores problems of food absorption as often associated with parasitic infections. It also defines out of existence all undernourishment due to lacking proteins, vitamins, minerals and other essential micronutrients, even while poverty-related deficiencies in Vitamin A, iron and zinc cause hundreds of thousands of deaths each year. The FAO's definition further ignores that many poor people do hard physical labor to ensure the survival of themselves and their families. Even if such people ingest sufficient energy to meet the “minimum needs for a sedentary lifestyle,” and are thus not counted as undernourished by the FAO, they may still die of starvation. Finally, to reduce the incidence of undernourishment even further, the FAO counts only those whose energy deficit lasts for at least a year: “the reference period should be long enough for the consequences of low food intake to be detrimental to health. Although there is no doubt that temporary food shortage may be stressful, the FAO indicator is based on a full year”



(FAO et al., 2012, p. 50; see also Pogge, 2016). The assurance that low food intake lasting less than a year has no detrimental health consequences is, of course, preposterous, especially when provided by the UN body officially charged with minding the global food system. Most of those who die of starvation do so in under one year and thus without ever suffering any undernourishment as the FAO defines it.

Sticking to its 2012 definition, the FAO estimates 768 million undernourished people for 2020 (FAO et al., 2021, p. 10). But in recent years the FAO has begun also to report two other estimates (FAO et al., 2021, pp. 18 & 27): the “number of moderately or severely food insecure people”: 2,368.2 million in 2020, and the “number of people unable to afford a healthy diet”: 3,000.5 million in 2019, before COVID-19. The average cost per person of such a healthy diet around the world is given as ca. USD 4 per day or USD 122 per month in 2019 (excluding any cooking expenses). Low as it is, this threshold provides a substantially more realistic criterion for food poverty than the one informing the FAO’s estimate of undernourishment. And it also shows that the World Bank’s latest international poverty line—amounting to USD 66 per person per month in the U.S. in 2019—is absurdly low, covering only half the cost of a healthy diet while leaving zero for clothing, shelter, utilities, medical care and all the rest.

Our brief discussion of the two most prominent official poverty tracking exercises shows that when the world’s governments, their international agencies and other defenders of the *status quo* present poverty as a small and disappearing problem, they commit a grave misrepresentation. Easily 3 billion people, 40% of the world’s population, live in severe poverty.<sup>9</sup> And the trend is up: according to the FAO, the number of moderately or severely food insecure people has increased each year, from 1,645.5 million in 2014 to 2,368.2 million in 2020; an increase of 44% in merely six years, despite all the grandiloquence about the Sustainable Development Goals. Academics are well placed to correct such misrepresentation and we have a firm moral duty to engage in the needed research, fundraising and coordination efforts to do so—as a sign of respect for the world’s poor and a tool for ending their distress. ASAP-J stands ready to support us in this task.

## Explaining Poverty

To explain something is to help us understand it (better). This broad meaning covers various kinds of explanation, including the above discussion on the definition and description of poverty. The present section addresses the narrower topic of *causal* explanations, which seek to identify and to analyze the factors that bring about some event, process or state of affairs.

---

<sup>9</sup> The World Health Organization reports that “globally, at least 2 billion people use a drinking water source contaminated with faeces” (<https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/drinking-water>), that “2.0 billion people still do not have basic sanitation facilities such as toilets or latrines” (<https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/drinking-water>) and that “an estimated two billion people have no access to essential medicines, effectively shutting them off from the benefits of advances in modern science and medicine” (<https://www.who.int/publications/10-year-review/chapter-medicines.pdf>). UN Habitat reports that “more than 1.8 billion people worldwide lack adequate housing” (<https://unhabitat.org/programme/housing-rights>).

Causal explanations should begin with a precise description of the event, process or state of affairs to be explained. This *explanandum* can take many forms, can be a particular event, for example, or a statistical phenomenon (undernourishment increasing in Haiti; Blacks being heavily overrepresented among the U.S. poor). To provide a causal explanation, one must identify the relevant causal factors (*explanantes*) that jointly bring about the *explanandum*, show that these factors are actually present and also show their causal effect on the *explanandum*.

Causal explanations can explain actual or hypothetical events, processes or states of affairs. Hypothetical explanations are crucial in planning, as when we ask how it is possible to eradicate poverty in Aceh. Here we start from a hypothetical state of affairs—a poverty-free Aceh in 2030, say—and then detail the (likewise hypothetical) causal factors that might jointly bring it about. Assuming the hypothetical causal explanation is correct, we can then implement the plan: put in place the missing *explanantes* and thereby bring about the *explanandum*.

Relevant factors can causally cooperate in diverse ways. Causes can be ancestral to one another as when falling dominos topple each other in sequence. Causes can collaborate additively as when the emissions of many emitters jointly cause the observed pollution. Causes can collaborate “multiplicatively” as when gun powder, oxygen and a spark must all three be present together to effect an explosion.

Most causal explanations are incomplete by focusing on merely a small subset of relevant causal factors while ignoring the rest. An explanation of the recent evolution of poverty in Bulgaria is unlikely to mention Genghis Khan, even though his surviving the 1187 battle of Dalan Balzhut and subsequent conquests surely make a difference. We cannot take every causal explanation back to the beginning of time. Causal explanations also often omit important factors that exert a simultaneous causal influence on the *explanandum*, such as the Earth’s gravitational field or the presence of oxygen in the atmosphere over Bulgaria. Things would be very different with poverty in Bulgaria without either gravity or oxygen—and yet we reasonably ignore these factors in our causal explanations by implicitly taking them for granted and holding them fixed. Such simplifications are necessary for producing useful explanations in real time. But they are sometimes far from harmless. Simplified causal explanations highlight the causal role of certain factors; and they obscure the role of others. Such omissions can be harmless, as when the explanation offered for the recent evolution of Bulgarian poverty fails to mention Genghis Khan, oxygen and gravity. Often, however, decisions to focus on certain causally relevant factors rather than others are driven by specific scholarly or political priorities that deserve scrutiny. In the study of poverty, it may sometimes make sense to focus on causal factors that are easier to change, but such a selective focus may also distort our attributions of responsibility: the fact that certain rules or practices are hard to change should not allow them to escape the judgment that they are gravely unjust in virtue of their very harmful influence on poverty.

Early in its history, the United States was dubbed the land of opportunity, the land where anyone could succeed and become rich. This narrative suggests an explanation of poverty focused on individual conduct. “If you are poor in the U.S., then you only have yourself to blame. Work hard, and you too can be a millionaire.” This narrative was expressed and reinforced by the then popular Horatio Alger stories about young men who worked their way up from farm hand or dish washer. Properly executed, such accounts can explain why some persons born into poverty

became affluent and why others did not. But they cannot explain the extent of such upward social mobility: why a certain percentage succeeded and the rest did not. To see why, we must recognize that it does not follow from the fact that some—or even each—person born into poverty can become affluent that *all* persons can do so. The pathways to riches may be sparse, and access to them competitive. It may be quite impossible for society to achieve the kind of economic growth rates that would be necessary for everyone to achieve affluence. An explanation of the success rate must include these constraints. And it must also explain why those who could have but did not work their way up to the top failed to do so. What social factors made them lack the knowledge or the ambition to climb the social ladder?

Such relevant social factors can be identified and evaluated with the help of regression analysis. We can collect various data about the people born in some chosen period and then examine whether and to what extent any of these characteristics make later economic success more likely. Among these factors might be height, childhood nutrition and health problems, number of siblings and place in the birth sequence, parental income, early death of a parent, number of books in the household, distance from home to the nearest high school, population size and average income of the home town, presence of a public library and so on. A statistical analysis can help show the greater or lesser causal relevance of these and other factors. And can also reveal *how* they are relevant: for example, it may turn out that parental income exerts its influence mainly through its impact on childhood nutrition which in turn influences the child's prospects of economic success by affecting her or his height and measured IQ.

Such work always raises new research questions: why does low parental income raise the probability of iodine deficiency during fetal development and infancy? How does height influence economic success? Less obviously, it also allows us to search for possible background factors without which some discovered causal influence would be different or non-existent. For instance, whether low parental income leads to iodine deficiency during fetal development and infancy is likely to depend on whether the country in question encourages or mandates iodine fortification of household salt and/or other basic foodstuffs.<sup>10</sup> If it does, then the iodine-mediated link from low parental income to low observed IQ may be entirely absent.

Let us illustrate this important point with three further reflections.

1. Relying on household surveys from many countries around the world, distinguished inequality researcher Branko Milanovic has concluded “that 80% of your income can be explained by the two factors of your country of birth (60%) and your parents’ income position (20%). The remaining 20% can be attributed to effort, luck or whatever else is the residual (gender, race).”<sup>11</sup> Since people have no choice over their country of birth, their parents’ income class, their gender, their race and the good or bad luck they encounter in the course of their life, we can conclude from the data that only a small fraction, perhaps around 10% or so, of the global variability of income is explained by something that individuals can actually control: their own effort. This conclusion may seem to be the end of the matter: by analyzing the relative importance of six

---

<sup>10</sup> Iodine fortification was first introduced in the U.S. and Switzerland in the 1920s. See Leung et al., 2012.

<sup>11</sup> “Interview with Branko Milanovic on Patterns, Causes and Remedies for Global Inequalities.” Graduate Institute Geneva, 24 May 2019. <https://www.graduateinstitute.ch/communications/news/interview-branko-milanovic-patterns-causes-and-remedies-global-inequalities>

relevant causal factors—country, parental class, gender, race, course-of-life luck and effort—we have explained 100% of observed income variability. But, really, this ought to be the starting point of the main phase of our explanatory investigation: how is it that our world is one in which those five unchosen personal characteristics are so heavily dominant? How did they acquire this heavy causal influence? And how exactly do they exert this influence? These questions might lead us to study the colonial period during which huge inequalities in national average incomes emerged, to question (as Milanovic does in the cited interview) how constraints on international migration perpetuate high international wage differentials, to examine the extent to which the existing international trading and financial systems aggravate international inequality, to research how the intergenerational transmission of advantage escapes taxes on wealth, capital gains, gifts and inheritances, and to explore how racist and sexist social practices and institutional arrangements aggravate race- and gender-based economic and social inequalities.

2. In recent years, randomized controlled trials (RCTs) have emerged as the “gold standard” in poverty research. The basic idea is to randomly divide a population into two or more groups, to treat these groups differently, and then to observe how the groups evolve differently in terms of poverty-relevant characteristics. If one group does better than another, then its treatment is inferred to be superior to the treatment or non-treatment received by the other group. In this case, again, it may be important to look for background factors that explain the observed difference in causal effect. It is possible, for instance, that the treated group benefits in a competitive environment *at the expense* of the other group so that, treatment efforts notwithstanding, the entire population realizes no benefit at all.<sup>12</sup> In this sort of case, the treatment may even support and entrench an injustice, exemplifying what is colloquially known as a “race to the bottom.”<sup>13</sup> Or it may turn out that the treatment reduces the harm members of the treated group suffer from a work hazard that could (should!) simply be removed.

3. Examining international economic inequality and its possible reduction, we are likely to be struck by observed large differences in the growth rates of different countries and in the related evolution of poverty within them. Some developing countries have had fast economic growth and have thereby diminished the distance in average income to the developed West. Others have had slow or even negative economic growth and have therefore fallen even farther behind. These conspicuous differentials in national economic performance have attracted much explanatory attention from economists seeking to identify the relevant causal factors that can account for the performance differentials.

One much-discussed factor is the relative size of the natural-resource sector: it turns out that developing countries tend to perform considerably worse in terms of economic growth and poverty reduction the larger natural resource extraction is as a share of their gross domestic product (the so-called resource curse). This finding should once more inspire deeper investigation

---

<sup>12</sup> Example: the treated group receives job interview training that helps it get a larger share of the available job offers.

<sup>13</sup> Example: in a certain randomly selected subset of garment factories various worker protections are suspended with the result that these factories can fulfill rush orders more quickly. Foreign clothing chains therefore channel more business to these factories, reducing temporary lay-offs of workers. Lay-offs increase in competing garment factories, which are thereby compelled eventually also to dilute worker protections.

of the taken-for-granted background factors that lead to the surprising result that large natural-resource endowments are a headwind. Here a first step is to note the link to bad governance: resource-rich developing countries tend to be poorly and corruptly governed. But why is this so? Arguably, part of the explanation is that the existing international order recognizes rulers—merely because they exercise effective power within a country and regardless of how they acquired or exercise such power—as entitled to confer legally valid property rights in this country's natural resources upon foreigners and to pledge such resources as loan collateral. Highly convenient also for foreign resource buyers, this international resource privilege enables repressive regimes to maintain themselves in power, partly with the help of imported weapons, even against the will of a large majority of the national population. It thereby also provides perverse incentives to try to acquire power by force, increasing the probability of coups and civil strife. The lesson here is that we should not simply rest content with having established a causal link from a large natural-resource endowment to bad governance but should also try to seek out the underlying cause or causes of this causal link. Doing so is good explanatory science and often also of great practical importance.

### **Assessing Poverty**

The assessment of poverty is an evaluative and often normative exercise that typically depends on explanatory insights. To be sure, one can make do without explanatory efforts by just adding a layer of moral regret to descriptive accounts of poverty, saying, perhaps in strong emotional language, that it is bad that so many children grow up undernourished. Such hand-wringing is common in political and religious circles, among those who want to be seen as caring, want all to know that their thoughts and prayers are with the poor. But in order to make progress against poverty, one must seek moral assessment that is combined with explanation to establish *responsibility*. One must identify the factors that play a causal role in the occurrence of poverty, particularly those that are subject to beneficial human modification and most especially those whose reform we ourselves could advance. The move toward such constructive moral assessment turns some *explanantes* into *judicanda*, that is, entities subject to a special kind of moral assessment that involves assignments of responsibility.

Not all contributors to poverty are fit to be treated as *judicanda*. It makes little sense to hold a volcano responsible for erupting or locust for gobbling up a precious crop. But even in such cases it may be appropriate to assign moral responsibility to other contributing factors: to assess the design and performance of the government's early-warning and disaster-response systems, for example, which are bound to influence the impact of the eruption or plague on the affected population. Assigning responsibility to these factors makes sense insofar as this responsibility can then be traced back to specific agents who designed, installed, maintained or operated these systems. The damage from the eruption or the locust depends in part on how well these people did their work. In the final analysis, constructive moral assessment focuses on individual and collective human agents.

A straightforward first stage of such an exercise is consequential assessment, that is, assessment of a *judicandum's* effects in the world. Given that poverty is a morally significant (regrettable) phenomenon, a *judicandum* has a responsibility in regard to poverty insofar as it has a causal influence on poverty. Other things being equal, any *judicandum* is morally better the

more poverty-avoiding its effects are. Of course, other things are rarely equal, and consequential assessment must then take account of other effects of this *judicandum* as well. In the case of an individual's conduct, these centrally include effects on the fulfillment of the agent's own interests. Consequential assessment of poverty-relevant conduct would then essentially perform a comparative cost-benefit analysis of an agent's decision in terms of its comparative effects on poverty and on the fulfillment of the agent's own interests. The word "comparative" indicates that conduct options are assessed relative to one another: choosing option *A* rather than *B*, the agent sets back her own interests by *m* and diminishes the ravages of poverty by *n*.

Few would deny that effects matter, morally. Consequentialists hold that they are all that matters. Consequentialists envision a uniform scale on which *m*, *n*, and other morally relevant effects can be assessed, and they then rank as morally best the conduct option that has the best effects overall.<sup>14</sup> This line of thought particularly highlights the vast social and economic inequality that has accumulated in our world. The severe poverty of those 3 billion people unable to afford a healthy diet at an assessed cost of around USD 4 PPP per day occurs in a world with average income of about USD 50 PPP per person per day — in a world with 56 million millionaires who would barely notice if a small fraction of their wealth were diverted to ending poverty.<sup>15</sup> For consequentialists, the striking, and morally grotesque, reality of our world is that it contains unimaginable human suffering among the poor (*n*) that could be alleviated at a cost to the rich (*m*) that is wholly insignificant.

Such a consequentialist approach evidently needs significant emendations in order to address decision making under conditions of risk or uncertainty. To apply it in real life, considerable simplification is also required because we cannot take into account all of a conduct decision's effects into the far future. As Zhou Enlai is reputed to have quipped, it is hard to assess the impact the French Revolution even with 200 years of hindsight. How much harder, then, to assess the long-term effects of our potential decisions in advance! — And yet, all this complexity cannot really upset the consequentialist presumption that money going from the rich to the poor generally improves the world as we know it.

Non-consequentialist accounts of moral responsibility might depart from consequentialist ones in various respects. One such departure would permit the agent to privilege her own interests in certain ways. Here one might limit the "sacrifice" that an agent is morally required to make with a rigid cap (a maximum on *m*) and/or with a flexible cap defined in relative terms (a maximum on *m/n*). Caps of both kinds are suggested in Peter Singer's work and also by the effective altruism movement that is being built in its wake (Singer, 1972; 2009; 2015). Singer himself seems to regard such caps as merely strategic, believing that the correct morality is consequentialist but that ordinary people typically act better in consequentialist terms if the sacrifice asked of them is capped, for instance at 10% of their disposable income. To fulfill this role, such a cap would have to be applied not to conduct decisions individually but rather to one agent's conduct over time, perhaps over a whole lifetime.

---

<sup>14</sup> A paradigm example of such a consequentialist approach is utilitarianism, which uses some conception of human happiness or flourishing as a uniform scale.

<sup>15</sup> According to Shorrocks et al. (2021), these millionaires own 45.8% of the world's private wealth, or USD 191.6 trillion (p. 17).

In a multi-option context, caps are naturally understood to use as baseline the option that best serves the agent's own interests. But this can seem inappropriate when this baseline option is morally problematic. When the conduct option that best serves the agent's own interests is a safe theft, then it may seem inappropriate to count the agent's loss from passing up this theft as a "sacrifice".

Related paradoxes arise for uncapped consequentialism also. Thus, a consequentialist morality would approve of stealing from poor people in ways that reduce poverty overall—by channeling the loot to someone (perhaps the thief) who needs it even more. To avoid such conclusions, consequentialism can be revised. One straightforward modification would make morally significant the distinction between what an agent actively brings about and what she merely allows to happen. If substantially more moral weight is attached to the former, then one can avoid some paradoxical conclusions: by committing the theft, the agent would actively aggravate the poverty of the victim whereas, by passing up the opportunity, the agent would merely leave unalleviated the poverty of the even poorer person whom the theft would have benefitted.

Another, more fundamental modification is to apply consequentialist morality not to the conduct of individuals but to the way human society is structured. Under the heading of "social justice," such an approach has been developed by the political philosopher John Rawls, who applies consequentialist reasoning first and foremost to the basic structure of a national society, by which he means its most important and pervasive institutional arrangements (Rawls, 1971). Poverty and other deprivations are to be avoided through a just organization of society; and the central responsibility of individuals in regard to poverty is then to promote and support such just design.

Such a Rawlsian approach is especially suited to the modern world where poverty results indirectly from the conduct of large numbers of differently situated agents who cannot possibly foresee how their conduct will impact poverty and other morally significant phenomena. It is far more promising for individuals collaboratively to structure their society so that it limits poverty as much as reasonably possible.

Rawls's approach might be broadened by recognizing that the incidence, distribution, depth and trend of poverty in a country is heavily influenced not merely by its institutional arrangements, especially including the structure of its economy, but by three other sets of features as well: by its social and cultural practices, customs and habits; by its infrastructure, including transportation, energy, water and communications; and by its physical environment as continually modified by the way the population interacts with it (settlements, agriculture, mining, pollution, rivers and canals, parks, forests, coastlines etc.). While Rawls focuses mainly on the first, all four of these sets of factors are in some degree subject to political design. In regard to all such factors one might ask how poverty would be different if this factor were modified in certain specific and feasible ways. Such consequential assessments are easiest and most reliable when they are focused on a single clearly specified parameter, such as the national minimum wage level or the reach of the national electricity grid. Often, however, it makes sense to take on the more challenging task of analyzing several modifications together because their effects would interact. The poverty effects of two modifications may be quite different from the sum of the effects of either one.

Such broader, holistic reflection is further encouraged by the fact that poverty is not the only justice-relevant consideration, but rather may conflict with other moral values in certain ways or may compete with them for limited resources or may come at excessive social cost. Ultimately the entire ensemble of society's institutional arrangements, social practices, infrastructure, and physical environment should be shaped so as to realize as well as possible the aims of social justice, including poverty avoidance. The country's government and citizens have a shared moral responsibility to make it so.

Rawls's assessment of a society's institutional order ("basic structure") is broadly consequentialist.<sup>16</sup> Yet, Rawls departs from a thoroughgoing consequentialism in the way he relates his theory to the moral responsibilities of human agents. There are two noteworthy departures. First, citizens are to comply with just institutional arrangements already established and are to promote their improvement—rather than directly to promote the aims that guide the structuring of their society. For example, citizens are to promote a just, poverty-avoiding design of their society's economy and to abide by its rules—rather than to steal from the rich in order to reduce poverty even farther.

Second, citizens are assigned a special responsibility for the justice of their own society rather than held responsible for protecting and advancing social justice wherever they can most cost-effectively do so. While we have moral reason to protect and promote just arrangements anywhere, we have especially weighty moral reason to do so in our own society whose structural features we are involved in designing, upholding and imposing. This special weight can be seen as arising from the moral significance of the distinction between what an agent actively brings about and what she merely allows to happen: as citizens, we are not mere bystanders and potential benefactors but co-designers and co-imposers of our society's main features. Structural injustices of our society are identified as ones to which we actively contribute (and from which we may also benefit), not merely ones we can do something about.

In the period since the end of the Second World War, the most important social justice considerations have been articulated in the language of human rights, presented "as a common standard of achievement for all peoples and all nations."<sup>17</sup> Most poverty-relevant among them are widely recognized social and economic human rights: "Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care..."<sup>18</sup> —including "the right of everyone to the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health."<sup>19</sup>

The language of human rights could be pressed into the service of consequential assessment with the idea that some or all *judicanda* ought (to be designed) to minimize human

---

<sup>16</sup> This is brought out by Rawls's thought experiment of the original position, which is a hypothetical social contract made by representatives each of whom is tasked with advancing the interests of one prospective citizen. Thus, possible agreements are assessed by how well they would serve the interests of individuals.

<sup>17</sup> *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*. <https://www.un.org/en/about-us/universal-declaration-of-human-rights>.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, Article 25.

<sup>19</sup> *International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights*, Article 12. <https://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/cescr.aspx>.



rights deficits. But the rights idiom more naturally lends itself to incorporating the moral significance of causal pathways (e.g., *doing* versus *allowing*) and hence the special responsibility of citizens for the justice of their own society. This differentiation is incorporated through the common division of human-rights-based duties into duties to respect, to protect and to fulfill human rights.<sup>20</sup> Active violations of human rights on the part of a government and society constitute weighty failures to respect human rights, failures in which citizens of the relevant society are typically implicated.<sup>21</sup> Failures to protect or promote human rights in other parts of the world are less weighty (holding fixed here the harm involved in the relevant human rights deficits and the costs of reducing or eliminating them). It is worse actively to deprive people of secure access to objects of their human rights than passively to fail to remedy a like deficit. And structuring a society so that human rights of some of its members foreseeably and avoidably remain unrealized counts as an active violation of their human rights, a case of disrespect. This point is apparent also in human rights litigation against governments, which is becoming more frequent. Governments are sued for failures to realize human rights in their jurisdiction, not for failures to promote human rights anywhere—though governments can and should, of course, also be held accountable for human rights violations they actively commit abroad, for instance in the course of military aggression.

There is yet a third way in which governments can actively violate human rights: through their participation in shaping the supranational features of our planet. Among these are its supranational institutional arrangements which, over the last three decades of intensive globalization, have become very much denser and more influential. This international institutional order is specifically mentioned in Article 28 of the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*: “Everyone is entitled to a social and international order in which the rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration can be fully realized.” This unique entitlement suggests that governments have a collective responsibility to ensure that they shape and structure supranational institutional arrangements in a human-rights-compliant way.

---

<sup>20</sup> This respect-protect-fulfill triad has become prominent in human-rights thinking in and around the United Nations. It goes back to Henry Shue’s seminal book (Shue, 1996, first edition 1980) which inspired Philip Alston and Asbjorn Eide, who popularized the respect-protect-fulfill triad in the 1980s (see Alston and Tomaševski, 1984 and Alston, 1984). This triad was then carefully elaborated in the famous General Comment 12, adopted in 1999 by the UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. Article 15 of this General Comment says: “The right to adequate food, like any other human right, imposes three types or levels of obligations on States parties: the obligations to *respect*, to *protect* and to *fulfill*. In turn, the obligation to *fulfill* incorporates both an obligation to *facilitate* and an obligation to *provide*. The obligation to *respect* existing access to adequate food requires States parties not to take any measures that result in preventing such access. The obligation to *protect* requires measures by the State to ensure that enterprises or individuals do not deprive individuals of their access to adequate food. The obligation to *fulfill* (*facilitate*) means the State must pro-actively engage in activities intended to strengthen people’s access to and utilization of resources and means to ensure their livelihood, including food security. Finally, whenever an individual or group is unable, for reasons beyond their control, to enjoy the right to adequate food by the means at their disposal, States have the obligation to *fulfill* (*provide*) that right directly. This obligation also applies for persons who are victims of natural or other disasters.”

<https://www.refworld.org/pdfid/4538838c11.pdf>

<sup>21</sup> Some fairly obvious exceptions apply here for children and for citizens who are relevantly disabled or too poor or oppressed to play a meaningful role in the governance of their society.

Drawing on our earlier discussion of Rawls's assessment of the justice of national societies, we might broaden this responsibility to include three other sets of features as well: international customs and practices, international infrastructure, and humanity's common historical heritage and natural habitat, including Earth's atmosphere, oceans, polar regions, and surrounding solar system. This collective responsibility of governments is analogous to the collective responsibility of citizens for the just structuring of their own society. And it is also included in this latter responsibility: insofar as citizens bear responsibility for what their government does in their name, they bear ultimate responsibility also for the role their government plays in shaping supranational features of our world: its trading, financial and communications systems, prevailing practices of international diplomacy, preservation of historical and natural treasures, protection of air, water, fish stocks and outer space.

### **Eradicating Poverty**

Poverty eradication is closely tied to explanation because it must suitably modify, and therefore comprehend, the causal factors that produce and perpetuate poverty. For eradication strategies to be effective, they must go farther, to a deeper causal analysis of whether and how these causal factors themselves can be modified. Such work poses challenges of three kinds. There are challenges of science and engineering, which may result in new gadgets or pharmaceuticals, new houses or bridges, changes in crops or farming techniques, connection to electricity or the internet. There are challenges of social reorganization, which may involve modification of property or taxation rules, reforms in social practices or taboos, safeguards against violence and corruption. And then, most fundamentally, there are broadly political challenges of persuasion: of getting other actors (sometimes merely one rich or powerful person) to agree on a strategy and then to implement it. This last set of challenges connects eradication to assessment insofar as one can build the needed political support through moral argument with appeal to the responsibilities of those one is seeking to convince.

Efforts toward poverty eradication vary widely in how profoundly they seek to change the world. At one end of the spectrum are individual gifts of money or property to poor people. The most common example of this are remittances, where persons, typically guest workers in a more affluent country, send some of their income to relatives and friends in their home country. Remittances are hugely important to poor people, amounting to USD 548 billion in 2019 and a surprisingly strong USD 540 billion in the COVID year 2020.<sup>22</sup> Given by people who are often undocumented and among the poorest in their host country, this amount greatly exceeds the official development assistance (ODA) by all the affluent countries combined which, in 2020, amounted to USD 161 billion—some of it given as loans and much of it paid to consultants and businesses of the donor state.<sup>23</sup>

---

<sup>22</sup> <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2021/05/12/defying-predictions-remittance-flows-remain-strong-during-covid-19-crisis>. Unfortunately, some firms charge substantial fees on remittances, thereby reducing their value. <https://www.westernunion.com/us/en/send-money/app/price-estimator>.

<sup>23</sup> This is 0.32% of the combined gross national incomes (GNIs) of the affluent countries (<https://www.devex.com/news/what-to-make-of-the-2020-dac-stats-99641>) which, since 1970, had been promising to reach 0.7% (<https://www.oecd.org/development/stats/the07odagnitarget-ahistory.htm>).

Cash transfers have recently been studied more systematically in the context of a non-governmental organization, GiveDirectly, that makes predictable cash payments via mobile phone to households in East Africa (mainly Kenya, Uganda and Rwanda). These transfers are unconditional: recipients can spend the money as they please, means-tested: only extremely poor households are included, and small: in the region of USD 1 per person per day, representing purchasing power of ca. USD 2. GiveDirectly has experimented with various giving formats (monthly for two years, monthly for 12 years, lump sum; including all or only some of a village's poorest people) and the outcomes have been closely studied, focusing particularly on emerging spending patterns, enduring gains in health and education, as well as negative and positive externalities such as envy and economic multiplier effects.<sup>24</sup> Given modern transfer and payment technologies, such direct and predictable income supports might prove to be highly cost-effective tools of poverty eradication, tools that could be instituted nationally or even globally in the form of an unconditional but perhaps means-tested basic income that could be presented as ensuring that all human beings get at least some of the value of our planet's used natural resources, including air, water and soil, all of which are now appropriated and used very disproportionately by a small affluent minority of humankind.<sup>25</sup>

Continuous with cash transfers and income supplements are national and supranational changes in tax and social support systems, which influence rather directly the distribution of the social product. In recent decades, such changes have overwhelmingly gone in the wrong direction, with massive reductions in top marginal tax rates and corporate taxes (which mostly fall upon affluent shareholders) and widespread privatization and austerity reforms shrinking state sponsorship and support of basic goods and services (foodstuffs, water, health care, education, electricity, local transport, trains, telecommunications, postal services etc.). These changes have greatly increased the gap between rich and poor and have thereby also gravely weakened the influence the poor can exert upon political decisions, either directly or through their unions and other organizations. Money can buy influence in politics, and in today's world any one of a few thousand billionaires and major corporations can outspend millions of poor people. Moreover, superrich individuals and major corporations have the incentives and opportunities to acquire the expertise and connections needed to deploy their political funds to optimal effect while poor people must invest great efforts to even get started through coordination on a joint plan of political action. Given the much-enlarged political power disparity between rich and poor around the world, it will be very difficult to modify tax and social support systems so as to make them more egalitarian.

While tax and social support systems are explicitly focused on adjusting poverty and inequality, many other structural features of national societies and supranational structures have

---

<sup>24</sup> See reports by Give Well (<https://www.givewell.org/charities/give-directly>) and by Dylan Matthews in VOX (<https://www.vox.com/future-perfect/2019/11/25/20973151/givedirectly-basic-income-kenya-study-stimulus>).

<sup>25</sup> For a proposal in this direction, see Pogge (2008, chapter 8). Paying income support of USD 1 per day to 3 billion people would cost USD 3 billion, substantially less than the USD 7 billion value of daily global consumption of just a single natural resource (crude oil sells at ca. USD 70 per barrel and global consumption is about 100 million barrels per day). Paying poor people a dividend from the value of natural resources extracted or degraded would raise their price, with wholesome ecological side effects.

profound effects on poverty and inequality that, far from their rationale and purpose, are easily overlooked. The point can best be introduced with an example. Innovation is crucial to human progress, and societies therefore provide incentives to invest in innovation. Globalized in 1995 through the TRIPs Agreement, humanity's predominant mechanism for encouraging innovations involves 20-year product patents that WTO member states are required to institute and to enforce. Such temporary monopolies reward innovators by enabling them to reap large markups or licensing fees from early users. The predictable result are high prices, especially for innovative products that meet urgent needs and especially in high-inequality environments.

The pharmaceutical sector provides dramatic illustrations. An important hepatitis-C drug, *sofosbuvir*, was introduced in 2013 at a price of USD 84,000 per course of treatment, which is roughly 3000 times the cost of production (Barber et al., 2020). In poorer countries, where the upper classes are less affluent and less well-insured, the profit-maximizing price typically is substantially lower—but still unaffordable with the also much lower ordinary incomes there. The reason is that, even *intra*-nationally, economic inequalities tend to be large and demand curves therefore highly convex. Sad but true: most people around the world cannot afford advanced medicines, at least until their patents expire which, with *sofosbuvir*, will start happening in 2024 (Reuters, 2015, p. 25). Five years after its market introduction, only about 7% of the 71 million persons living with hepatitis C had been treated, while the remaining 66 million remained ill and potentially infectious to others (Clinton Health Access Initiative, 2020). Each year, millions of people suffer and die from lack of access to medicines that generic manufacturers would be happy to mass-produce and sell quite cheaply.

It may be said in defense of patents that these millions of deaths are simply unavoidable: if patents were abolished, most potential innovations would not be forthcoming, especially in the pharma sector where development of a new product can cost USD 1 billion or more. But this defense overlooks that innovations can be encouraged and rewarded in other ways. We might, for instance, reward innovators from public funds according to the social impact they achieve with their innovations, sold at competitive prices. As with the patent system, the fixed cost of innovation would then largely be borne by those who can afford it. Yet there would be no need to exclude the rest. With socially valued innovations rewarded from public funds, all can have access to them without monopoly markups. Such a system of impact rewards can work in any domain where a uniform metric of social value can be formulated, such as health gains (pharmaceuticals), pollution reduction (green technologies), knowledge, skills and employment (education), nutrient yield and reduced use of fertilizers and pesticides (agriculture). Such a system would work even better if many countries jointly supported it, thereby greatly increasing its social value while diluting its cost.

Complementing patents, impact funds would revolutionize innovator incentives. Monopoly rewards turn innovators into jealous spies in search of possible infringers. Impact rewards would encourage innovators actively to promote their registered innovations' fast, wide and impactful diffusion. Registrants would even subsidize it to poor buyers insofar as the increase in rewardable health impact justifies the cost of the subsidy.

Patent rewards fail to encourage innovations that meet needs mainly of the poor. Impact rewards would make it profitable to produce such innovations because impact is assessed

regardless of the economic position of the beneficiaries. Pharmaceutical innovators could then profitably develop and deploy good new treatments for the notoriously neglected tropical diseases, which afflict over a billion people, and for other major diseases concentrated among the poor, like tuberculosis, malaria, hepatitis and pneumonia, which together kill some 7 million people annually.

Patent rewards penalize innovators for suppressing their target disease, as doing so would shrink their own future market. A Health Impact Fund would fully reward third-party benefits: innovators who successfully contain a disease are rewarded for protecting people from infection even if these people never need treatment.<sup>26</sup>

Many structural features of national societies and of our wider society of nations might be similarly reformable in a way that preserves their essential function while reducing their inequalitarian, poverty-aggravating distributive effects. Exploring and instituting such reforms would greatly reduce the “work” that tax and social support systems must do to keep extreme poverty and inequality at bay. And it might better address the structural causes of poverty with an eye to the special challenges poor people face in regard to nutrition, water, shelter, health and health care, sanitation, clothing and personal care, energy, education, social and political participation and respect, physical safety, family planning, environmental degradations and hazards, working conditions in employment and at home, navigating governmental agencies and the legal system, banking and credit, travel and transportation, data and communications.

### **Introducing Journal ASAP’s Inaugural Issue**

Following my more academic Welcome, you will meet the journal’s Managing Editor Najid Ahmad, who went from growing up in a poor, non-electrified village in rural Pakistan to being a popular economics professor in China, and whose vivacious self-introduction brings poverty and academia together. After that, Issue 1/1 properly opens with an essay by Doris Schroeder, Kate Chatfield, Vasantha Muthuswamy and Nandini Kumar on “Ethics Dumping: how not to do research in resource-poor settings,” which raises important issues—relevant for many of the authors who will be writing for Journal ASAP—about how we should conduct research that touches communities and individuals in economic distress.

Next come the four winners of the 2020 seventh Amartya Sen Essay Prize Competition. Co-sponsored by Yale’s Global Justice Program and the Washington think tank Global Financial Integrity, the annual Sen Prizes reward original work on financial corruption as systematically facilitated by a vast network of tax havens, secrecy jurisdictions, shell companies, fake trusts and anonymous accounts, along with an army of shady lawyers, accountants, lobbyists and financial advisors. As revealed by various spectacular whistle blows (LuxLeaks, Panama Papers, Bahamas-List, Paradise Papers, etc.), this sophisticated infrastructure helps vast amounts of capital income and corporate profits evade taxation; and it also enables crimes of many other kinds, such as illegal trafficking in persons, drugs and weapons, international terrorism, corruption of and by public and corporate officials, embezzlement and the money laundering associated with all such activities. In these ways, the global haven industry massively aggravates national and global inequalities and greatly impedes the development of poor countries by enabling

---

<sup>26</sup> See [www.healthimpactfund.org](http://www.healthimpactfund.org).

multinational corporations, autocrats, corrupt officials, millionaires and criminals to drain them of capital and tax revenues. The 2020 competition called specifically for essays on illicit financial flows, defined as cross-border movements of funds that are illegally earned, transferred, or used.<sup>27</sup> The Sen Prize jury selected four entries from the 20 received. Erhieyov O’Kenny won first prize with his essay on the culture of cyber fraud in Nigeria; and three second prizes went to Brian Ocen for his analysis of profit shifting in Uganda’s oil sector, to Philip Mutio for his study on illicit financial flows related to the extractives sector on the African continent, and to Roy Cullen for his discussion of money laundering in British Columbia (Canada). These four essays form the centerpiece of our first issue; and ASAP-J is looking forward to publishing also the winning entries of future annual Amartya Sen Essay Prize Competitions.

Our inaugural issue concludes with two shorter opinion pieces. One discusses the Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa (AGRA) which, jointly established in 2006 by the Rockefeller and Gates Foundations, was meant to bring scientific agriculture to Africa. Michiel Korthals contends that, despite large investments by 13 African states, the promised doubling of incomes has not materialized and that nutrition, biodiversity and water availability have all deteriorated. He argues that successful agriculture in Africa must be sensitive to local conditions and build on local knowledge and experience.

No national professional group in the world contains more people, or more poor people, than India’s agricultural sector, which is shaken by massive farmers’ protests against three pieces of legislation recently passed by the Indian government. In her invited opinion piece, Sudha Narayanan helps us understand what these protests are about and shows the way toward a more democratic reform path that would be sensitive to the concerns, needs and vulnerabilities of India’s smallholders and landless agricultural workers.

The last four pages contain an invitation to contribute to future issues of this *Journal* along with detailed guidelines for such submissions, followed by an invitation to submit by 31 August 2022 an essay for the Ninth Amartya Sen Essay Prize Competition, which is jointly sponsored by Global Financial Integrity, ASAP and the Yale Global Justice Program. Winning essays will receive USD 5,000 (first prize) or USD 3,000 (second prize) and will be published in *Journal ASAP*.

Completion of this first issue could not have succeeded without our main Essay Editor Kieran Donaghue in Australia. We are deeply indebted to him, and grateful also to our Administrative Officer Paul Keller and many others who are helping *Journal ASAP* with reviews and in diverse other ways.

## References

Alston, P. (1984). International Law and the Right to Food. In A. Eide, W. B. Eide, S. Goonatilake, J. Gussow, & Omawale (Eds.), *Food as a Human Right* (pp. 162-174). The United Nations University Tokyo.

---

<sup>27</sup> Illicit financial flows are explicitly recognized as an obstacle to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals and singled out as a separate target #4 of SDG 16. <https://www.un.org/ruleoflaw/sdg-16/>.

- Alston, P., & Tomaševski, K. (1984). *The Right to Food*. Netherlands Human Rights Centre (SIM).
- Barber, M. J., Gotham, D., Khwairakpam, G., & Hill, A. (2020). Price of a hepatitis C cure: Cost of production and current prices for direct-acting antivirals in 50 countries. *Journal of Virus Eradication*, 6(3). <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jve.2020.06.001>
- Clinton Health Access Initiative. (2020). Hepatitis C Market Report. Issue 1. [https://www.globalhep.org/sites/default/files/content/resource/files/2020-05/Hepatitis-C-Market-Report\\_Issue-1\\_Web.pdf](https://www.globalhep.org/sites/default/files/content/resource/files/2020-05/Hepatitis-C-Market-Report_Issue-1_Web.pdf)
- FAO, WFP & IFAD. (2012). The State of Food Insecurity in the World 2012. FAO. <http://www.fao.org/3/i3027e/i3027e.pdf>
- FAO, IFAD, UNICEF, WFP and WHO. (2021). The State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World 2021. Transforming food systems for food security, improved nutrition and affordable healthy diets for all. FAO. <https://doi.org/10.4060/cb4474en>.
- Leung, A., Braverman, L., & Pearce, E. (2012). History of U.S. Iodine Fortification and Supplementation. *Nutrients* 4(11), 1740–46. <https://www.mdpi.com/2072-6643/4/11/1740>
- Pogge, T. (2008). *World Poverty and Human Rights*. Polity Press.
- Pogge, T. (2016). The Hunger Games. *Food Ethics* 1(1), 9–27. <http://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s41055-016-0006-9>
- Pogge, T. & Cabrera, L. (2012). Outreach, Impact, Collaboration: Why Academics Should Join to Stand Against Poverty. *Ethics & International Affairs*, 26(2), 163–182. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0892679412000275>
- Rawls, J. (1971). *A Theory of Justice*. Harvard University Press.
- Reuters, T. (2015). Patent Situation for Key Products for Treatment of Hepatitis C: Sofosbuvir. Working paper prepared for the World Health Organization. [https://www.who.int/phi/implementation/ip\\_trade/sofosbuvir\\_report\\_updated.pdf](https://www.who.int/phi/implementation/ip_trade/sofosbuvir_report_updated.pdf)
- Shorrocks, A., Davies, J., & Lluberas, R. (2021). Global Wealth Report 2021. Credit Suisse Research Institute. <https://www.credit-suisse.com/about-us/en/reports-research/global-wealth-report.html>
- Shue, H. (1996). *Basic Rights. Subsistence, Affluence, and US Foreign Policy*. Princeton University Press.
- Singer, P. (1972). Famine, Affluence, and Morality. *Philosophy & Public Affairs*, 1(3), 229–43. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2265052>
- Singer, P. (2009). *The Life You Can Save – How to Do Your Part to End World Poverty*. Random House.
- Singer, P. (2015). *The Most Good You Can Do – How Effective Altruism Is Changing Ideas About Living Ethically*. Yale University Press.
- Smith, A. (1976). *The Wealth of Nations*. University of Chicago Press.