

MYTH #1: The Poor Just Need a Few More Dollars

“Money is better than poverty, if only for financial reasons.”

– Woody Allen, *Without Feathers*

“The only problems that money can solve are money problems.”

– Unknown



Defining Poverty

A friend of mine who works for the United Nations and who was, at one point in her career, a ‘poverty expert,’ once teasingly remarked that my cozy, compact home in Sri Lanka barely qualified as decent poverty. I had, after all, only one bedroom, a one-burner stove, and a kitchen that doubled as an office. On another occasion, a colleague from the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) informed me that she wanted the poor in Dhaka to join the middle class, which she defined as ownership of a home and car. My friend’s joke and colleague’s comment raise the important issue of what exactly those in the ‘business’ of poverty reduction aim to achieve. It matters what people mean by poverty, because how one defines it also affects one’s goals, the likelihood of achieving them, and the extent of environmental damage that results from providing the level of consumption that one considers sufficient to raise people out of poverty.ⁱ

Let us start with the question of abject, material poverty.ⁱⁱ One common way to define it is the number of people (or percentage of the population) living on less than one or two dollars a day. While these parameters can identify a group of truly needy people, this definition says very little about the experience of poverty. Defining poverty strictly in monetary terms, such as number of dollars spent per day, ignores the context in which people live their lives. How much people can buy with their money varies widely across and even within countries. How much money people need also varies considerably depending on the level of access they

ⁱ The Myth about Economic Growth addresses the link between consumption and environmental damage in more detail.

ⁱⁱ It is not always possible (or desirable) to be politically correct when discussing poverty. In some cases, I am unaware of a better term that could include a whole group and thus am obliged to use a word to which I personally object or with which I do not agree (some ‘poor’ countries are far wealthier in culture, community, language, dress and generosity than many ‘rich’ ones) or that may sound derogatory (‘lower classes’). However, it is more important to spend time resolving the problems associated with poverty than to seek uncontroversial terms with which to discuss them.

have to basic services.ⁱⁱⁱ People living on fifty dollars a day in a high-consumption country may still be extremely poor, while that amount would be considerable elsewhere. Those in the countryside who live in their own homes and grow their own food will typically need vastly less cash than those who live in cities. People who have to pay for education and health care will need a lot more money than will those who receive such services from the government for free.¹

Rather than being measured in terms of dollars per day, abject poverty could more meaningfully be described in other ways: as the inability to afford three decent meals a day; as lacking sufficient shelter that protects against the cold or diseases related to exposure (including rodent bites); as the inability to send one's children to school because the fees are unaffordable or because the children's labour is needed to help support the family; as the persistence of sleepless nights full of worry about how to pay one's medical bills or rent and the homelessness that may result if these bills are not paid. Using such descriptions has the added benefit of providing a clear image of people's life circumstances, beyond the actual amount of money that they earn.

One step above abject poverty is what medical anthropologist and physician Paul Farmer calls 'decent poverty.'^{iv} People falling into this group would include those whose housing is basic but still adequate to protect them from the elements and from rodents. It takes account of those who have enough good quality food to stay healthy, whose children are in school, and who have access to affordable health care, but who cannot afford many non-essentials. Those living in decent poverty may be unfashionably dressed, reside in simple housing, get about mainly by foot or on bicycles and public buses, and often work at more than one job to get by — but they do not suffer from cold, hunger, or the threat of imminent homelessness.

ⁱⁱⁱ It is impossible to avoid the use of some vague terms; obviously adequate shelter is relative and location-specific (adequate housing and clothing in a tropical climate could prove deadly in a cold one). I was surprised at how well housed the poor were in La Paz until I remembered that Bolivia has cold winters. Some North American cities address the problem in less humane fashion through heating grates on which the homeless can sleep during the winter.

^{iv} "What happens when the destitute...stand up for what is theirs, to reclaim what was theirs and was taken away, to ask only that they enjoy decent poverty rather than...misery...?" Tracy Kidder, *Mountains Beyond Mountains* (New York and Toronto: Random House, 2004).

A further step above decent poverty is relative poverty, which refers to those in the lower middle or even middle classes. People in this group have far more than enough to survive and enjoy various modest comforts, but still suffer from a sensation of poverty when they compare themselves to their neighbours or others in their city or country. They have enough food and decent housing, can afford the occasional meal out and some fancier clothing, but struggle to pay the costs needed to elevate their children to a higher class or to allow them to participate fully in the middle class ideal of consumption. This may include the strain of tutoring fees, the inability to afford a car, or the necessity to forgo shopping in fancy stores or eating in expensive restaurants that their neighbours seem to frequent.

When I lived in a small town in Guatemala, my host family felt wealthy. They lived in a plain cinderblock house with a tin roof; it was impossible to be indoors during the day because it was so hot. Nine people shared the one bathroom. However, unlike most families in the town of about two thousand people, they had a flush toilet, some land of their own, and cows. They had plenty of food and could afford to fix their broken TV.^v I then moved to Florida, where I felt I was living it up in my very simple apartment because I could drink water right from the tap, the sinks and showers produced hot water on demand (not just when the sun supplied it), and I only had to share the bathroom with one other person. A good friend of mine at the time lived in a large house, her child attended a private school, and both she and her husband held good white collar jobs; yet she felt poor because others in her neighbourhood had far more, and more expensive, possessions. One's sense of prosperity is certainly relative.

Research has shown that once people attain a basic level of wealth, they seem to gain contentment from further increases in wealth only if they visibly rise above their neighbours. Additional material wealth will not necessarily make people feel less poor as long as there are others who have more. For example, the *World Happiness Report*, a comprehensive overview of various studies of wellbeing, finds that:

A household's income counts for life satisfaction, but only in a limited way. Other things matter more: community trust, mental and physical health, and the quality of governance and rule of law. Raising incomes can raise happiness, especially in poor societies, but fostering cooperation and community can do even more, especially in rich societies that have a low marginal utility of income...[W]hile absolute income is important in poor countries, in richer countries comparative income is probably the most important.²

^v But why bother when they could spend their evenings singing rancheros with a guitar under the lime tree?

As the above quote points out, wealth and deprivation are not only about money and possessions. Chilean economist and environmentalist Artur Manfred Max-Neef observes that:

...one should speak not of poverty, but of poverties. In fact, any fundamental human need that is not satisfied reveals a poverty: poverty of subsistence is due to insufficient income, food, shelter, etc.; poverty of protection is due to violence, the arms race, and so on; that of affection is due to authoritarianism, oppression and exploitative relations with the natural environment; of understanding, to bad quality of education, of participation, to marginalization and discrimination against women, children, and minorities; of identity, to imposition of alien values upon local and regional cultures, forced migration, political exile, etc. ...³

Those other poverties may seem at first to be less important than material ones, but they can be as real and devastating as suffering from chronic hunger or cold.

While material and experiential poverties can coincide, often they do not.⁴ A friend in West Africa commented on his experience after moving from a poor, dirty area – where he constantly worried about the health of his wife and daughter – to a ‘wealthier’ part of town. His new home consisted of a couple of rooms in a three-unit, one-storey cement block; hardly fancy by Western standards, but a big step up from his previous location. He told me that after his move, he had tried repeatedly to greet the neighbours on either side but they had not responded. This was in stark contrast to his previous home, where admittedly there was little privacy but at least people talked to each other and the surrounding open space was filled with neighbours working and interacting.

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While living in Dhaka, I changed apartments, moving to a far nicer location, partly to escape the pervasive stench of sewage in my old neighbourhood. When robbers had tried to break into my first apartment, a neighbour immediately saw them from her kitchen window and ran to alert my landlord; a group of people then chased away the would-be thieves. In the nicer location, people are more respectful of boundaries and neighbours do not know each other; robberies happen unhindered. I find the area friendly, as many people greet me when I pass through on foot, but virtually none of the people I pass actually live there; they are vendors, guards, and beggars. The upper class come and go in cars, have little casual contact with their neighbours, and are only superficially friendly. Their help in a time of need is, unfortunately, somewhat unlikely.

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Wealthy children and adults may suffer from a ‘paradoxical poverty’ in which they have a large home, car, and plenty of food, but lack social connections and confidence in dealing with their environment. I once asked a Bangladeshi woman

to send her hefty 15-year-old son a few blocks to visit me; she declined on the basis that she was too busy to take him and he might be kidnapped if he came alone. I tried not to laugh at the image of the number of muscular kidnappers needed to overpower her son, in daylight, on the typically crowded streets of Dhaka. However, I repeatedly see the result of the restrictions that the middle and upper class place on their children: not just children but teenagers afraid to move about the city alone and who often lack basic social skills due to their limited exposure to people beyond their tight circle.

A multi-country UNESCO study on the relationship between community, poverty, and the wellbeing of children and youth found that "...institutionalising young people's activities...can undermine young people's autonomy and exacerbate their separation from their own community." In country after country, the report found that the poorest children and youth were not necessarily the worst off. Not just financial security but opportunities to engage with their community were vital to the wellbeing of the young.⁵ People do better when they live in a supportive community where they can turn to their neighbours or colleagues for help; where they have trust in others, be they officials or the people they see on the streets; and where they feel that they have a valuable contribution to make to their community. International research has shown that these are some of the ingredients that contribute much more than simple income to a sense of wellbeing.⁶ People might have a greater sense of wellbeing if they lived in a less consumer-oriented society in which human relationships were seen as more valuable than money.

The distinction as to what actually constitutes poverty is important. If one defines poverty simply as not having enough money or not being able to purchase many of the goods that are available for sale, then the simple solution is for people to have more money. The poor do indeed need more money, but that money is only helpful if they can use it to buy what they actually need. If people have more money and the cost of living increases proportionately, they are no better off. Likewise, people would need a lot less money if they could meet their basic needs in other ways, such as through government-provided services, self-production, or local trade and barter. Even in megacities, people live in neighbourhoods that could facilitate local exchange; rooftops and verandas provide space for growing significant quantities of food. The question is not how much money people need, but rather how they can access – not necessarily through purchases – the basics that allow for a decent quality of life.

While working to reduce material poverty, it is important to attempt to maintain or expand experiential richness. This requires acknowledging that poverty is not

just about material deprivation, and that communities that are poor in material goods may be quite rich in other ways and vice versa. Those who ignore the non-material aspects of poverty will fail to address them and, in doing so, potentially further impoverish those they seek to help.

The focus on money as the solution to poverty also gives industries and governments an excuse to implement activities that can actually lower people's wellbeing, such as building unsafe and polluting factories to create more jobs. Focusing on money makes polluting industries look like a net benefit and ignores their environmental costs as well as the value of the entire social economy – all the exchanges that occur without money. Without a measure focused on wellbeing, it is difficult to explain why some people may be better off without a formal job or why having access to an unpolluted river is more important than earning enough to pay for privatized water supplies.

Given that those at the top of the economic pyramid should be consuming significantly less – both for the health of the planet and to make more available to others – and that those in abject poverty should be consuming more, the focus should be not on increasing per capita income but rather on bringing the living conditions of the very poorest up to a decent level while reducing excess at the top. More of the world's limited non-renewable resources should be directed towards ending absolute, wretched poverty. In doing so, though, it is critical not to harm social structures or to worsen the environment; the focus should be on outcomes rather than cash.

***Hint:** Beware of those who suggest that we can eliminate poverty without being specific about what they mean by poverty or who focus on money rather than wellbeing.*

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Do NGOs have a role in reducing poverty?

I half-jokingly referred in the opening sentences of this chapter to the 'business' of reducing poverty. In fact, non-government organizations or charities are a great source of employment for many people. This leads to the unfortunate situation that succeeding in the goal of reducing poverty would mean working oneself out of a comfortable job. While NGOs are usually sincere in their efforts, how they define poverty will determine whether they can succeed in reducing it. Yet reducing vaguely defined 'poverty' continues to be the target for many. A few examples: Oxfam International seeks "to end poverty and injustice."⁷ CARE's slogan is "Defending dignity, fighting poverty" and seeking to "expand economic opportunity."⁸ Nor is the focus on poverty limited to NGOs. The World Bank's mission "is to fight poverty with passion and professionalism for lasting results

and to help people help themselves and their environment by providing resources, sharing knowledge, building capacity and forging partnerships in the public and private sectors.”⁹

Fight poverty. End poverty. Expand economic opportunity. Missing from these slogans is the link between extreme wealth and extreme poverty. Missing is the possibility of decent poverty – of modest lifestyles that are adequate for people’s needs and not harmful to the planet. Also missing is the concept of social justice – of a mechanism that regularly and automatically shifts wealth from the top down and helps to ensure that it circulates there rather than rising back to the top.^{vi} As to the notion of fighting poverty, one may wonder if poverty actually fights back. It does...especially when we focus on its symptoms rather than its causes.

NGOs certainly do have an important role to play in reducing or eliminating abject poverty. In order to do so, they need to be clearer about what they mean when they talk about ‘fighting’ and ‘ending’ it. When do NGOs say that they have reached their goal? When NGO staff members receive high salaries and live well, how much do they sympathize with their real target and how reasonable are their goals?

Many NGOs do great work in the world. However, that work has limitations that are absent in their documentation. To read NGO reports to donors, one would think that nobody should be suffering anymore from violence, poor harvests, or natural disasters. According to those reports, NGO projects are usually extremely successful. Then why does abject poverty still exist?



Towards a Better Way: Moving from Dollars to Sense

“The benefit [of price controls] lay in ensuring that key components of a civilized life – including electricity, communications, energy, banking, education, and health care – were available to all, regardless of their money income. This fact placed a floor under the real incomes of working, retired, and disabled people so far as the most basic consumption goods were concerned.” – James Kenneth Galbraith¹⁰

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Poverty is not a simple issue with simple answers. Poverty is about more than money, and it is about more than material needs. On the bright side, this means that even in circumstances of very limited money, it is possible to improve quality of life significantly.

^{vi} I explore this point further in the Myth about Inequality.

Better measurement systems provide a better approach

As I discuss in more detail in the Myth about GDP, countries need a better way to measure how well their populations are doing. Rather than measure poverty in terms of dollars earned or spent per day, their focus should be on outcomes. It is possible to measure people's access to the essential necessities of life: sufficient food, clean water, sanitation, shelter, education, health care, opportunities to participate in community and government, and protection from the violence of crime and war. Specific measures include life expectancy, maternal mortality, infant mortality, calories consumed per day or number of meals skipped per month, percentage of the population with access to clean water and a decent latrine, percentage of the urban population that lives within 800 metres of a usable public space, and so on. Countries and population groups could then rank as very low, low, medium, high, and very high in terms of the wellbeing or quality of life of their citizens.

Defining wellbeing more broadly...and working to achieve it

A broad definition of wellbeing is set out in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights; Article 25 establishes that

Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and wellbeing of himself and of his family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care and necessary social services, and the right to security in the event of unemployment, sickness, disability, widowhood, old age or other lack of livelihood in circumstances beyond his control.

Article 26 of the Declaration further states, "Everyone has the right to education. Education shall be free, at least in the elementary and fundamental stages. ... higher education shall be equally accessible to all on the basis of merit."

Those concerned with alleviating poverty need to pressure governments to provide more generous safety nets including free, universal, quality education (for adults as well as children), health care (including programs to prevent disease and make it easier for people to stay healthy), and transportation (good conditions for walking and cycling as well as public transit). People need to pressure governments to increase access to sanitation, clean water, and healthy foods by enacting policies to prohibit privatization of water and to subsidize healthy rather than unhealthy food. People must push governments to redirect the money they currently use to subsidize the rich and instead invest it in infrastructure and programs to benefit the poor.^{vii}

^{vii} There is more discussion of this topic in later myths.

Many, though by no means all, poor people could work their way to a better life if they had better opportunities to do so. Others, such as young orphans, mothers of young children or of children with special needs, or people with a full-time caretaking job at home, or those with various disabilities that make it impossible to earn a sufficient living, will need government and community support, at least temporarily. Efforts to increase access to paid employment must accompany efforts to ensure the quality of that employment, including wages, working hours and conditions, and holidays. Bangladeshi garment workers have reportedly started rolling their eyes at attempts to increase their minimum wage, as the last such increase, though far less than their demand, led to a proportionate increase in the fees they pay for their onsite housing and food. Many workers pay more per square foot for their housing than do residents of luxury apartments. A job is all very well, but it is not enough to help people out of poverty if it pays an inadequate wage or puts an intolerable additional burden on the worker or fails to protect workers from exploitation.

The more that governments and communities take care of basic needs, the more money people will have available to access what is not free. Beyond education, health care, and transport, there are other important areas of life. It is easier for people to accept having smaller homes and less in-house entertainment when the city is their living room. Great public spaces like parks and plazas can provide entertainment, room for activity, and relief from isolation and loneliness.

What a decent standard of living might look like

For those who live in low-consumption countries, a decent standard of living would include a home of sufficient quality to protect its residents from the elements and from rodents, sufficient clothing to keep people warm, nutritious food, easy access to potable water and a clean latrine, and enough electricity for basic needs (such as lights and fans). There would not necessarily be running water, and certainly not flush toilets, in every home. The standard would not include washing machines, dishwashers, air conditioning, or in most cases motorcycles or cars.^{viii} Some of these amenities, such as washing machines, might exist

^{viii} Detailed discussions of global justice in terms of current divisions of the world's resources, and the grossly disproportionate share that Americans and some other nationalities consume, is beyond the scope of this book; the reader can draw her own conclusions. Nor is it up to me to decide how the world's poor will live. But discussions of a reasonable level to aim at are vital to making wiser decisions about resource allocations and addressing poverty.

in public places.^{ix} In Guatemala, the shared place to access water – the community pila – is where women gather to socialize, chatting as they wash clothes and dishes. It would be more convenient for them to have water in their homes, but the trade-off would be greater isolation from the community. Fewer heavily processed foods and more fresh ones would help not only the environment but also public health, as would fewer cars and fewer TVs. Even youth might not mind less time with Facebook if, in return, they had better opportunities for face-to-face socializing and fun.

A little respect would go a long way

Imagine if people treated the homeless and others with little or no money with great respect or friendliness, and the wealthiest with undisguised scorn. People would pause to greet beggars or to sit on the sidewalk with them to listen to their stories. Tired workers would relieve some of their stress by cursing drivers of big fancy cars when they try to occupy parking spaces reserved for bicycle commuters. Better yet, the police would impound the Porsches while waving on the Schwinn.^x Imagine if the darker your skin, the better the treatment you received in shops and restaurants, and if perks were reserved for the lowest-level employees. Janitors and cleaning women would have their own private canteen with the best food; executives would have to walk down the hall to use a common and not particularly clean toilet. Factory workers would go on junkets, and managers would have only one bathroom break a day. Local officials would regularly fete Prakash and his family for their low-impact lifestyle.

Pure fantasy, of course, but the point is that it is possible to separate income from other advantages. At least some of the lure of wealth has less to do with consumption than with the prestige and other privileges associated with money. When considering different approaches to addressing poverty, it helps to abandon realism temporarily in favour of imagination. It is at such moments that the most astonishing and beautiful possibilities can emerge, possibilities that are unlikely to make themselves seen when one is simply arguing about how to remedy issues at the margins without addressing various aspects of the status quo.

^{ix} At least one author argues that there is joy to using Laundromats due to their social possibilities. See Rick Risemberg's take on them:

<http://www.newcolonist.com/laundromat.html> and

<http://www.sustainablecitynews.com/laundromat3rd.html>

^x Schwinn are cheap bicycles.

Of course taking a more enlightened social approach to the poor is no substitute for major policy changes. However, those social approaches have their significance, and could help relieve some of the suffering of the poor while they wait for needed policies to come about. While in university, I bumped into several formerly homeless men in and around Boston, whom I recognized from the shelter where I had volunteered. They informed me that simply being treated with respect by Harvard students at the homeless shelter had made such a difference in their self-confidence that they felt able to find a way out of their desperate poverty.^{xi} All of us can afford to be more generous with our smiles, nods, and brief greetings to the poor and marginalized (including all the ‘invisible’ workers that we encounter each day). They will likely appreciate the friendliness and their returning smiles will make our lives a bit better. After all, the first step towards demanding humane treatment is to believe that you are human, a belief that may rapidly fade when your humanity is denied on a daily basis. This is one of the easiest injustices to remedy, and one of the first steps to creating wellbeing.^{xii}

Fixing transportation

In urban planning and transportation, as in tobacco control, fiscal concerns that have little to do with promoting liveable environments dominate the discourse. The experience of virtually all countries demonstrates that building more urban roads encourages more traffic and thus results in more traffic injuries and deaths, as well as pollution, destruction of valuable land, and high costs for maintenance of the roads and the vehicles. In much of the world, the poor are marginalized in communities far from the urban core and from jobs, schools, health care, and almost everything else. They spend significant chunks of their income and of their precious time just to avail themselves of high-cost, poor-quality transport, which contributes to keeping them poor.

Many cities are now discouraging driving of private vehicles through measures such as congestion charges, higher parking fees, restrictions on car ownership, higher taxes, and urban planning that focuses on bringing destinations closer. At

^{xi} One was working at a bank, another had found a construction job; a third, to my astonishment, was employed at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT): he showed me his lab there. All three had found housing, either in a halfway house or with friends, and carried themselves with pride.

^{xii} A colleague told me about interviewing a man in Dhaka who pedals a rickshaw. The rickshaw wallah said that the worst aspect of his job is the lack of respect that he faced every single day.

the same time, they encourage the space-saving modes of walking, cycling, and public transport – all measures that have tremendous benefits for the poor. As a result, in addition to having less congestion, less pollution, lower transport costs, more public spaces (including reclaimed parking lots), and less need to tear down increasing swathes of their city in order to build more roads, these cities are now better places for the poor – and everyone else – to live.^{xiii} These changes would also provide multiple benefits for health and the environment, and would save money for both governments and individuals.¹¹ They also increase mobility options for the large portions of the population that are too young, too old, too poor, or otherwise unable to drive.

The dual approach of the carrot and the stick is the most effective as well as the most humane. It does little good to offer people an environmentally better approach, such as public transit, while still making it easy to access everywhere by car. Until there are fewer cars, it is nearly impossible to provide quality public transit, as well as good conditions for walking and cycling. Higher fees for parking, for registering a car, for fuel, and so on can also fund needed improvements in public and active transport that benefit everyone.^{xiv}

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Local funds for local improvements: In Mexico, a group has found a way to ensure that parking fees pay for local parks and public spaces that benefit the poor. The group piloted a new parking fee scheme in which the fees charged on streets in a specific neighbourhood were used to upgrade public spaces in that neighbourhood. The community now loves this program and new communities are requesting it.¹² While all residents benefit, the poor in particular appreciate better conditions for affordable transport (walking and cycling) and free, outdoor recreation, since they cannot 'opt out' by using a car or paying membership fees for recreation in private clubs. Such programs have the additional benefit of allowing people to see where their taxes or fees are going, rather than having the money disappear into the city's coffers with no noticeable results.

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^{xiii} While congestion charges and parking fees seem minimal compared to the price of buying a car, they still are effective at changing people's behaviour. What may be most important in pricing policies to discourage waste is not the absolute amounts but a sudden increase in prices that even the rich notice.

^{xiv} 'Active transport' refers to human-powered transport, usually walking or cycling in order to reach a destination. Active transport reduces congestion and pollution, provides people with much-needed physical activity, and saves on transport costs; it also contributes to making cities more sociable and liveable.

First steps

Rather than working towards the vague goal of ‘poverty eradication,’ people should focus on ensuring that nobody has to live in abject poverty. Fortuitously, that goal is likely achievable by redistributing existing wealth – perhaps even ‘simply’ by dramatically reducing the wealth of the world’s billionaires and multi-millionaires and redirecting it to those with the least. The goal is also achievable without causing irrevocable damage to the planet. Given all the resources available today, there is no reason why people should go hungry, lack a decent latrine or safe drinking water, and live in miserable shacks. Continued efforts to redistribute wealth from the top down are necessary, through higher taxes on the rich and on corporations to fund a wide range of social programs that would help to alleviate the material suffering of the poor. Stringent employment laws would allow more of the poor to work their way out of abject poverty. Among other benefits, violence would decline in societies that are more egalitarian.

It is vital, however, to reduce non-material poverty at the same time as material poverty. Encouraging popular involvement in local decision-making – such as creating local committees that have a voice in local and regional funding allocations – would reduce political disempowerment. Ensuring that every community has public spaces in which community members can gather at no cost would help foster interaction, as would a focus on non-motorized (fuel-free) transport and public transit. Less pollution and more attractive natural environments would also enrich people’s lives. More emphasis on cooperation and less on competition (in school, in sports, in our approach to promoting business) would contribute to stronger, more vital communities. Strong social networks enhance wellbeing and happiness and encourage problem solving; importantly, they do so without depleting the resource base or destroying the environment.

Much of what today are considered ‘fringe’ movements (such as slow food, Community Supported Agriculture, food co-ops, and more cooperative approaches to problem solving) need to move to center stage.^{xv} If more people focused their creativity and brainpower on solving problems, such as how to feed the world without relying on transnational food companies, many solutions thus far unimaginable would likely become evident. Someone with funding and a keen interest in promoting wellbeing needs to recruit creative young people into such national and international problem-solving efforts, especially those led by small, flexible,

^{xv} In Community Supported Agriculture, people pay farmers at the beginning of the growing season (which allows the farmers to avoid taking out loans at interest) and receive a portion of whatever produce the farmer grows during that season.

freethinking groups. Now, the only decently-paid jobs many educated and creative people can find are likely to be in large corporations, especially in marketing or other consumption-oriented businesses. Enticements are lacking, including respect and other non-monetary incentives, to enter more socially useful professions. Enhancing wellbeing – defined in terms of meeting basic needs, encouraging strong social relations, and providing leisure and the enjoyment of a clean environment and attractive public spaces – should be our goal, not just ‘ending poverty.’

I talk more about how to achieve these desired changes in Part II of this book. For now, a few key points. A goal of enhancing wellbeing for all does not mean that everyone currently consuming more than the average would necessarily have to reduce their consumption, but it would require a far more equitable distribution of resources. The first step is to dramatically reduce the accumulation of wealth at the top and shift it to the bottom. Some forms of self-denial will do nothing to help the poor, like finishing all the food on your plate whether you want it or not (because people of some obscure nationality are going hungry). Sacrifice for the sake of decency is a useless gesture; what we need are actions that can actually help others, such as conscious spending decisions that help to reallocate resources to those in need.

We can *all* contribute to the redistribution of wealth and other important actions by making an effort to buy from small, local shops rather than from Big Box stores. (A colleague in India tells me that he has convinced various friends to buy from small neighbourhood shops rather than big grocery stores, using the argument that they should not want to make the owners of the big stores even richer.) Buying from local shops might appear to cost more, as they cannot offer the same low prices as the huge corporations. However, if the external costs were included in these calculations – such as the effect of big box stores on local employment, local businesses, and the environment – their goods would no longer seem so cheap.

People in cities who have access to other means of transport can give less of their money to oil companies by avoiding driving.

Those who work for NGOs need to challenge themselves by asking whether their efforts are making as much of a difference as they should. ‘Grassroots’ work is, of course, important, but it should feed into policy solutions. There is too little connection in many countries between those with knowledge of community conditions and those working on national policy approaches. NGOs need to collaborate with each other, with the media, with government, and with other interested parties to draft and work for the passage and implementation of

policies that will reduce abject poverty and make life a bit easier for all. My colleagues in Bangladesh, for instance, have successfully countered an initiative to institute user fees in all public health services; more such campaigns are needed around the world. Business as usual will not solve the world's problems, though it will keep some people comfortably employed. We need unusual approaches to overcome the poverty of ideas and the multiple poverties of the poor.

Notes

¹ Marilyn Waring, *If Women Counted: A New Feminist Economics* (New York: HarperCollins, 1990).

² John Helliwell, Richard Layard and Jeffrey Sachs, eds., *World Happiness Report* (New York: Earth Institute, Columbia University, 2012).

³ Manfred Max-Neef, "Human-Scale Economics: The Challenges Ahead," in *The Living Economy: A New Economics in the Making*, ed. Paul Ekins (London, New York: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1986).

⁴ Louise Chawla, *Growing Up in an Urbanising World* (Paris and London: UNESCO and Earthscan, 2002).

⁵ Chawla, *Growing Up*.

⁶ Helliwell et al., *World Happiness Report*.

⁷ Oxfam International, "Who We Are," <http://www.oxfam.org/en/about> accessed 13 July 2014.

⁸ CARE, "Our Work," www.care.org/work accessed 13 July 2014.

⁹ World Bank, "What We Do," <http://www.worldbank.org/en/about/what-we-do> accessed 13 July 2014.

¹⁰ James Kenneth Galbraith, *The Predator State: How Conservatives Abandoned the Free Market and Why Liberals Should Too* (New York: Free Press, 2009).

¹¹ Debra Efroymson, Roxana H Hafiz and Lori Jones, eds., *Ecocity Planning: Images and Ideas* (Dhaka: WBB Trust, Bangladesh University of Engineering and Technology, and Health Bridge, 2008), and Debra Efroymson, Maruf Rahman, and Ruhan Shama, *Liveable Cities: Ideas and Action* (Dhaka: HealthBridge and WBB Trust, 2009). Available for free download at www.healthbridge.ca

¹² Andrés Sañudo, "Los parquímetros en Polanco: impactos, lecciones y tendencias para México (Parking Meters in Polanco: Impacts, Lessons, and Trends for Mexico)," presentation made at Walk21, Mexico City, October 2012.