



POVERTY



PACSA FACTSHEET

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POVERTY MAKES PEOPLE SUB-HUMAN – EXCESS WEALTH MAKES PEOPLE INHUMAN

DOM HELDER CAMARA.

More than 100 Biblical texts link oppression to poverty and it is recognised in the Bible as the basic cause of poverty.

The existence of widespread poverty and human wretchedness in many parts of South Africa is not a matter of chance but can be attributed to oppression in one form or another. One of the most serious consequences of poverty is the high infant mortality among the poor.

SOME CHILDREN NEVER GROW UP – THEY DIE OF HUNGER



MORE THAN 50% OF ALL DEATHS AMONG AFRICAN AND 'COLOURED' PEOPLE IN SOUTH AFRICA ARE CHILDREN UNDER THE AGE OF FIVE.

INFANT MORTALITY

According to the Pietermaritzburg Medical Officer's 1980 annual report the infant mortality rate for Blacks in the borough was 8 times that of the White population, at 24 per 1000. A survey carried out by a doctor in Vulindlela (formerly Zwartkop Reserve) showed a rate of 42 per 1000 or 14 times that of the Whites in Pietermaritzburg in 1980. In Nqutu (Northern Natal) in the mid-seventies a study revealed a figure of 88 per 1000. Another survey covering four other Zulu communities gave the following:

KWA-MASHU	54
INANDA (Ndwedwe)	134
HLABISA	80
MAWELA	111

INFANT MORTALITY RATES (Dept. of Health – 1975)	
ASIANS	35
BLACKS	100
'COLOURED'	104
WHITE	20

Infant mortality rates only reflect death up to the age of 1 year, and medical experience is that children are most vulnerable up to 5 years of age. Doctors admit too, that what is seen in hospitals, is only the tip of the iceberg.

POVERTY / IGNORANCE CYCLE

Because of the high infant mortality rate, people have more children. Because of poverty, parents need several children to support them in their old age. Thus they have to stretch their meagre family resources further. Anyone criticising the poor for the population explosion does not understand the implication of the poverty/ignorance cycle.

OVERCROWDING

Poverty determines lifestyle and habits and leads to overcrowding. Enforced population relocations and increasingly tighter influx control measures (for Blacks) exacerbates an already serious situation – 72% of the South African population has only 13% of the land.

An example of overcrowding in Natal can be seen at Nqutu (Northern Natal). According to the Tomlinson Commission (1955) this area could only support 13 000 people. Today the population is about 100 000 and the plan is to relocate more people into this area. The many relocation areas in Natal – some being Ekvukeni, Ezakheni, Mondlo, Nondweni and Compensation Farm – are other examples of overcrowded areas.

Overcrowding is not limited to relocation areas. The Vulindlela area (Zwartkop reserve) has a high population density but there is little in the way of infrastructure to help relieve the situation. Urban townships: Soweto (JHB); Imbali (PMB); Nyanga, Langa and Guguletu (Cape Town) and many others are very densely populated and the extremely high housing shortage in all these areas exacerbate an already serious crisis.

HYGIENE

A high population density particularly in rural and peri-urban areas can lead to a poor environmental hygiene. The number and type of latrines (usually pit) and the siting of these can and does affect the quality of the water supply (see PACSA Factsheet No. 6 – WATER). This poor quality of water (and the lack of it) in many areas, together with an inadequate diet either through poverty, or ignorance, or both, has a marked effect on the health of people – especially the very young and the elderly.

INFECTIOUS DISEASES

T.B.
This disease is South Africa's worst health scourge and millions of people are infected – mostly deprived and malnourished people living under congested and unhygienic conditions. Professor Glatthaar (Medunsa) states that latent T.B. infection could be activated by stress such as unemployment anxiety, poor living standards, malnutrition, travelling long distances to work and diminished sleep.

CHOLERA

At least 188 people have died in the recent outbreak of Cholera in South Africa – a shocking fact which confirms that poverty exists here but is too often ignored.

TYPHOID

The outbreak of this disease in the Inanda area (near Durban) in 1980 also re-affirms the presence of poverty in our wealthy land.

MEASLES

According to Prof. A. Moosa (Medical School, University of Natal) "the undernourished child is at higher risk . . . it is often a disease like measles that pushes such a child over the borderline into a severe state of malnutrition".

MALNUTRITION

The most common nutritional diseases are protein calorie malnutrition (kwashiorkor and marasmus), the interaction between protein calorie malnutrition and gastro-enteritis, and pellagra. As shown in the above diagram, disease and malnutrition interact; the one causes and is worsened by the other.

UNEMPLOYMENT

An aspect that is implied in this poverty cycle (see diagram above) is unemployment and underemployment. Various socio economic studies indicate very high unemployment figures in the rural and peri urban areas, with very little prospect of a reduction of these high levels in the foreseeable future. One such study in a section of the Vulindlela area indicates an unemployment rate of 30% and broken down further reveals a 40% unemployment rate for women and a 20% rate for men.

Long term unemployment is a contributory factor to the development of a feeling of apathy, helplessness and futility amongst the poor. Coupling this with the debilitating effects of malnutrition on childhood growth creates serious problems for community development: the development of an inadequacy syndrome, leading to a lack of motivation and a fatalistic resignation to one's plight, will tend to perpetuate the whole poverty life cycle.

A CHRISTIAN RESPONSE

The whole Church is the Body of Christ, the caring and serving community. We need to enable and encourage it to start discovering, highlighting and denouncing the mechanisms of oppression that make and keep people poor. We need to ask too, whether the gospel is "Good News to the Poor" or a rationalisation for the rich.

"The uncomfortable truth which we must soon be mature enough to bear as both the Church and individual, is that the world is hungry because we demand a standard of living which is only possible by using the resources of other parts of the world".

Erik Daman, author of "The Future is in our Hands".

SUGGESTED READING:

"Affluence, Poverty and the Word of God" Edited by Dr.K. Nurnberger.
"The will to have less" Father Finbar Synott. (Copies available from PACSA)
See also earlier PACSA factsheets.

