

Poverty: A socio-economic threat to sustainable development as envisioned by South Africa's transformative regime

Mashele RAPATSA¹

¹University of Limpopo, mashele.rapatsa@ul.ac.za

Abstract. This article discusses the phenomenon of poverty, considerate of its impact on sustainable development. This takes into account the fact that South Africa's post-1994 dispensation recognized and placed sustainable development at the core of its normative and institutional framework founded essentially to safeguard sustainable livelihood for humanitarian gains. It is for this reason that socio-economic rights got entrenched in the Constitution, 1996 and were afforded judicial enforceability. This constituted a strategy through which judiciary would devise creative interventions, in cooperation with government, to effectively mitigate adverse socio-economic effects of poverty among indigent communities. This article relied on South Africa's constitutionally entrenched transformative theory as a tool of analyses. It is asserted that as a socio-economic problem, poverty inhibits realization of basic human rights such as education and health care, which are indispensable for sustainable development. Further that lack of employment opportunities owing to sluggish economic growth compounds the problem even more thereby making poverty a pervasive challenge to development at large.

Keywords: poverty; transformation; human rights; socio-economic rights; unemployment; development.

1 Introduction

South Africa's 1994 political transition can best be described as a moment of reflection during which society's social, economic and political integration topped the national agenda in pursuit of sustainable development. This would eventually characterize South Africa as a people centered developmental state. Thus, in a hopeful developmental state, poverty reduction and its eventual elimination ought to be perceived by policy makers as a crucial priority for social and economic development policy (Klasen, 2000; Asnaoui and Belhadj, 2015). It is for this reason that a universally recognized inherent connection between the phenomena of poverty, distribution and accumulation of income and the process of development constitute significant features that aid in ascertaining specific contributions that may be drawn from people's social and economic activities. This resonate the traditional view of neoclassical economics that development as a process entails changes in incomes over time, and further that countries where poverty levels are high tend to experience low levels of human development (Fosu, 2007). As a result, the diverse nature of universe has rendered poverty to be an internationally complex subject especially pertaining to its precise meaning and wide-ranging implications to sustainable development. This has culminated in dissimilarities in terms of how countries define the concept of poverty both narrowly and in broader terms (Frye, 2008). Hence, the crafters of statutes and policies geared towards dealing with poverty for stabilizing humanitarian conditions are continuously confronted with multiplicity of challenges, particularly with regards to tailoring legal and economic responses that are suited for complimenting efforts of uprooting the scourge of poverty. This is necessitated by the fact that poverty presents with it a multiplicity of threats to humanitarian needs, societal stability and survival, and in the end society's development in a

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variety of spectrums. Thus, poverty retains the status of an all-encompassing phenomenon which bears significance to a wide range of developmental aspects. This happens to such an extent that its complex nature requires stable industrialized or macro-economic conditions, whichever is preference, that are complimented by a properly functional tax system which draws resources to cater specifically for the needs of indigent people and not the elite or government functionaries (cabinet ministers and/or members of parliament or so called powerful politicians. This is indispensable for sustainable development wherein every human potential is made feasible to thrive without impediments.

It is worth noting that South Africa's post-1994 dispensation recognized poverty as a threat to development. It is for this reason that the government has since developed a comprehensive set of strategies in an attempt to deal with poverty using a variety of instruments and complimentary programmes, which include introduction of means-tested social grants, unemployment insurance funds, and related public works programmes aimed at safeguarding the working poor (Hagen-Zanker and Morgan, 2011). However, whether these mechanisms have proffered desired results remain a contested issue, which has rightfully generated dissents and proponents mainly in academic scholarship, considerate of ongoing economic challenges facing the country in the modern political economy.

Within the same context, sustainable development is concerned with striving to bolster social and economic conditions that enable human life to thrive. This also entails that human development is an essential tenet which is somewhat contingent on people's realization of basic human rights. Thus, in measuring whether a country is on course to achieving sustainable development, notable considerations ought to be made, and this include an assessment on the extent to which basic human rights are achieved, access to education, social security and the elimination of phenomena such as child labour, that render children susceptible to exploitation. Ostensibly, the notion of sustainable development coincides with South Africa's twenty one years of democratic regime, as it entered the political center stage of policy discourse over twenty years ago when Brundtland Commission posited it to 'connote a development strategy that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs' (Little, 2009).

2 Rationale and methodology

The object of this contribution is to highlight the critical impact of poverty in determining the extent to which any democratic government succeeds in bettering living and humanitarian conditions of its citizens. It envisages achieving this by illustrating four ways through which poverty impairs potential and eventual stability in society. Thus, the article examines dimensions of poverty as a socio-economic phenomenon and as a developmental issue. This takes into consideration the continued rights discourses that are threatened by fragile economic conditions. It examines the impact of poverty on sustainable development using aspects of; poverty on basic human rights realization, poverty on education, poverty on social security and poverty on child labour. These phenomena are posited as core to sustainable development as propounded in accordance with aspirations of the United Nations Declaration on the Right to Development of 1989 and Millennium Development Goals 1, 2 & 4.

The ultimate objective of this article is to illustrate how poverty is holding indigent South Africans at ransom, children in particular, by depriving them of much desired opportunities necessary to realize their full potential. It seeks to emphasize on the significance of appreciating the adverse impact of poverty on basic human rights realization and human development at large, with the goal of awakening legislators and policy-makers about the intrinsic urgency of the need for meaningful radical anti-poverty strategies. It cautions that pervasive poverty is a threat to social cohesion, peace and

stability in society.

This research paper adapted to qualitative style of research and utilized content analyses method. It relied on data from written texts in the form of legislations, policies, international instruments/conventions and scholarly works such as journal articles, books and reports. A review of these primary and secondary sources culminated in swift identification of aspects that need to be addressed with concerted efforts to realize sustainable development in meaningful terms.

3 Theoretical background

South Africa's problem of poverty has been in existence for decades, and is rightfully being regarded as one of disconcerting legacies of apartheid (Carter and May, 1999; Patel, 2012). Even today, poverty levels remain unacceptably high (May, 1998; Reddy and Sokomani, 2008; Lehohla, 2014; Frye, 2014), although government is often perceived as being constantly uncomfortable to suggestions that this problem is worsening (Meth and Dias, 2004). Most predominantly, it specifically afflicts majority of people in rural villages, townships and informal settlements who were generally disenfranchised by apartheid. Hence, the historical context presents poverty as the main reason for people's hardship, disillusionment and strife, which substantially disorientate prospects of development in a variety of ways. Its modern complex nature is compounded further by sluggish economic growth, whereas a consistently high economic growth is essential for poverty reduction. In years between 1995-2012, economy reported average growth rate of approximately 3.2 percent (Bhorat and Van der Westhuizen, 2012; Zuma, 2014).

From a theoretical perspective, conceptualizing poverty often becomes a daunting task because of its multifaceted nature. According to Kehler (2001) poverty can generally be viewed with reference to inability to attain minimum standard of living, which according to the World Bank, is measured in terms of basic consumption needs or income required to satisfy such needs. This subscribed to the general theory of Peter Townsend (1962) who posited that individuals or families whose resources, over time, fall seriously short of the resources commanded by the average individual or family in the community in which they live, are accordingly in poverty. This entails that because of its links with developmental aspects, it can be conceptualized in accordance with determinants of well-being or by the access people have over such determinants of well-being. This was emphatically reiterated by analysis of the Taylor Committee¹ which stated that poverty can best be understood within the context of individuals, households or entire communities' inability to command sufficient resources to satisfy socially acceptable living standards (Brockerhoff, 2013). Thus, the notion of 'inability' or 'incapacity' on the part of individuals or communities illustrates intrinsic interlinkage between poverty and the notion of development. Discernibly, when communities lack the means, development stagnates.

David Elesh (1973) classified poverty theories into two, namely; cultural and structural theories. According to Elesh, cultural theory explains poverty based on attitudes and behavioral patterns of poor people themselves, that such in a way influence or systematically prevent them from being socially able to develop. In contrast, structural theory concentrate on conditions under which people live, inclusive of their socio-economic statuses such as unemployment, illiteracy and weak education levels, poor health and lack of developmental opportunities in general. Thus, the present article subscribes to

¹ Committee of Inquiry Into a Comprehensive System of Social Security for South Africa, which was established in 2001 by the Minister of Social Development. This Taylor Committee produced a report titled "Transforming the – Protecting the Future", detailing comprehensive recommendations with regards to calibrating state social security systems.

structural theory on poverty, which is that material social and economic conditions predominantly dictate and measure the extent of humanitarian wellness in society, and in the end illuminates the context of poverty.

Brian-Vincent Ikejiaku (2009) showed that the developmental nature of poverty presents it as a multi-dimensional issue that goes beyond economics, to include aspects of social, political and cultural aspects. According to Ikejiaku, poverty is premised on the human needs theory, which denotes that poverty prevails when people are denied access to biological and psychological needs as far as growth and development are concerned. He argued that access to basic needs such as water, food, shelter, health care and the likes are determinants of poverty, necessarily because lack or inadequate access thereof adversely inhibits sustainable development thereby rendering nations to economic failure.

A cogent proponent of theory-based meaning of poverty, Barbara Stark (2009), posited that poverty can be understood in the context of spiraling inequalities of wealth possession. She stated that unfathomable disparities of wealth between the rich and the poor are the starting point for a better grasp of the context of poverty. She argued that every legal system needs theory to provide some relatively formal and coherent explanations on aspects of life and development, necessarily because no single system of law specifically addresses poverty. Accordingly, liberal theory is favored as it explains the conception of poverty as a matter of morality, as matter of justice and as a matter of utility, aspects which fundamentally regard human rights theory as an indispensable tool of development. Barbara rightfully emphasizes that the South African Constitution, 1996 drew on liberal theory in its effort to address poverty by entrenching social and economic rights. Thus, liberal theory on poverty entrenched its relevance to South Africa as it resonate fundamental values and objectives of transformation agenda.

Itumeleng Tshoose (2009) used the theory of *Ubuntu*, a distinguished African philosophy of life, to posit how the democratic regime used rights based approaches premised in law, to advance sustainable development. *Ubuntu* means humaneness (Kamwangamalu, 1999), further that '*motho ke motho ka batho*', which means '*a person is a person through other persons*'. Tshoose does this by associating this theory with social protection phenomenon whereby income earners combine forces with state to provide resources to sustain indigent communities. According to Tshoose, *Ubuntu* depicts that kind of cooperation between individuals, cultures, communities and nations with the view of safeguarding humanity against poverty, while ensuring sustainable development. Hence, as a constitutional value, *Ubuntu* play a crucial function of enabling people to co-exist and support development driven initiatives that benefit society and livelihood of humanity.

Deducible from these theoretical connotations is that poverty is both an attitudinal and circumstantial phenomenon. This entails that processes of defining and striving to eliminate poverty to foster sustainable development require an unconditional appreciation of persons' attitudinal standpoint and circumstances that determine person's wellbeing.

4 Transformative Constitution and developmental ideals

The post-1994 transition encompassed a transformative Constitution which culminated in a governance system that would be premised on the supremacy of the Constitution, which also committed to sustainable development by strategically placing it at the center of normative value system and its framework. The system subscribed to the theory of constitutionalism, whose fundamental doctrine is that government derives its authority from the governed people, and that all government actions should be justified and exercised in accordance with legally stipulated rules. From this injunction, Karl Klare (1998) coined the notion of transformative constitutionalism which he posited as a constitutional process through which the constitution drives transformation through legal

avenues, with the aim of restoring human dignity, equality, social and economic justice, and fundamental freedoms necessary to enable sustainable development in society. Thus, the new dispensation was formulated in a manner that it should induce major transformation in social, legal, political and economic terms in an effort to alter historic conditions created by apartheid. What follows is a reflection on the intrinsic relationship between poverty and human rights, education, social security and child labour. These aspects were selected because they are considered as core to socio-economic development because of influence derived from both structural and liberal theories on poverty, which are essentially concerned with structural conditions that people live in.

Human rights and poverty

The theory of human rights features in the contemporary world as an essential aspect of development. This entails that the process of democratization ought to comprehensively embrace the idea of inculcating the culture of human rights which is necessary to give authentic meaning to freedom. The case of South Africa present a perfect example because under apartheid, human rights culture could not develop, and the system bred intolerance, violence culture and disrespect for life and rights general (Sarkin, 1998). This effectively undermined potential of humans in terms of developing to their full potential mainly because of widespread socio-economic deprivations (Sarking, 1999) which were systematically executed through legal methods. This affected sustainable development negatively in the sense that society's beneficial legacies could not pass from one generation to the next.

The crux of human rights theory is that Constitutions ought to guarantee and protect civil and political rights, socio-economic rights and third generation right to development. These tenets constitute indispensable values that guide sustainable development. However, embedding these norms does not automatically imply that people can easily assert them, especially in the midst of South Africa's high poverty levels. It has been shown that the rights discourse in the country is appealing but lacks some practical achievements as desired by the people, especially the poor who happen to be the previously disadvantaged. These majorities of previously disadvantaged citizens still struggle under appalling humanitarian conditions, and therefore may never realize any sustainable development. People are still unable to meaningfully assert their entitlements of basic rights to dignity, equality and a variety of socio-economic rights (Rapatsa, 2015) essentially because of poverty.

It is for this reason that poverty has been acknowledged as being responsible for the world's variety of unfulfilled basic human rights (Pogge, 2005). South Africa is no exception as majority of impoverished masses in rural villages and townships invariably battle to assert their rights. Deducible in this regard is the notable reality of tri-partite interrelation between poverty, human rights and development. To be able to realize rights and development, poverty must be eliminated first and foremost.

Education and poverty

Systems of education play a crucial role in equipping citizens with skills and competencies for them to be active in society's economic development (Cremin and Nakabugo, 2012). Hence, the contemporary changes brought about by globalization have made acquisition of education and literacy skills increasingly core to development (Little and Green, 2009). There is also a historical recognition which links education with development owing to the crucial role it played in advancing the world development agenda especially in the periods 1990s onwards (Tarabini, 2010). Thus, universal education access also forms an integral part of Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). It is for this reason that 'education for sustainable development as an international policy discourse' has intensified as a campaign featuring both in areas concerning social and economic objectives (Nomura, 2009) mainly because these are inadvertently interlinked aspects on poverty issues.

With South Africa's 1994 transition, the Constitution entrenched the right to education in section 29. It was hoped that the reformed educational systems would be embedded to augment nation's broader developmental goals. An understanding was therefore formed that this would aid the creation of acceptable social structure, resultant from dismantling material disadvantages that bred poverty under apartheid (Hammet and Staeheli, 2013). However, studies have shown that since the advent of democracy, meaningful educational changes are yet to be realized given that wealth and race remains the sharpest distinguishing factor between the rich and the poor, in which case educational quality is determined according to affluence (Spreen and Vally, 2006; Van der Berg, 2008; Spaul, 2013). This entails that poor people, predominantly in African/Black rural areas, receive a much inferior education, which in the end impact on their labour market prospects, effectively bearing

significance on sustainable development nationwide.

Social security and poverty

Poverty also features as a precursor to social security (otherwise referred to as social protection). Social protection is essentially premised on state's interventionist strategies that provide cash or in-kind benefits to poverty ridden and/or indigent individuals or communities that are unable to support themselves. Since the 1990s, this has been considered the best pro-poor growth strategy specifically inclined towards economic and human development (Ulriksen, 2012). This is also seen as a workable method through which family protection in sub-Saharan Africa can be realized (Mokomane, 2013). Thus, an appreciation of disconcerting poverty levels culminated in constitutional inclusion of the right to social security in section 27(1)(a)-(c) and (2). In the main, the context of social security is essentially to provide basic needs to people who are unable to meet such needs by themselves. This includes provision of food, water, health care, energy/electricity, no-fee basic and tertiary education. Current state social transfers include child support grant (meant to benefit children under the age of 18 years), foster care grant (paid to parents or guardian of foster children), care in dependency grant (paid to parents of disabled child), old age grant (paid to elderly citizens over 60 years of age), disability grant (allocated to people living with disability) and war veterans grant.

However, recent developments have suggested that provisioning of social security is under invariable threats. It has been shown that over sixteen million people (over 30% of the population) currently depend on state funded social grants for survival. This happens against the fact that unemployment levels continue rising (Statistics SA, 2014). Because social grants are largely funded through state tax collections, it is clear that the provisioning of social assistance and other free services may not be sustainable moving forward, considering that the economy continues to experience some turbulences and low growth rates. But it remains indisputable that this grant system constitutes government's workable mechanism to safe people from destitution, especially because others like Ferguson (2007) posited that the poor majority continue to suffer abject poverty long after apartheid ended.

Child labour and poverty

Child labour affects development in many ways, mainly because it interferes with children's schooling, welfare, physical and psychological development. Thus, children ought to be protected against involvement in exploitative work. This is important because children constitute the most vulnerable group in society. It is for this reason that child labour is a prohibited economic activity, which continues to thrive despite notable national and international efforts to eliminate it. It is prohibited in terms of section 28(1)(e) and (f) of the Constitution, 1996 and section 43 of Basic Conditions of Employment Act 57 of 1997. In principle, we need to understand why children become docile to child labour if we are to register meaningful progress against it. This is owing to the fact that its adverse effects on sustainable development cannot be understated. There is widespread anecdotal evidence proving that poverty is the main factor behind proliferation of child labour (Harsch, 2001). Thus, societies whose children are enslaved in child labour which effectively compromises their education prospects experience major disinvestments to its own development. Persistent involvement of children in harmful exploitative work deprives them an opportunity to enjoy childhood, thereby inhibiting their chances of normal upbringing that prepares them to become productive adults to the economy and humanitarian values.

5 Conclusion

This article intended to illustrate how poverty impairs negatively on sustainable development. The paper is underpinned by the need to appreciate the holistic nature of the concept of sustainable development, that it is an all-encompassing societal issue. The theoretical background reveals that there is no universally static meaning of poverty, although various factors across the globe have been noted to offer some commonalities in terms of demystifying what the notion entails. Four aspects of constitutional significance were selected to explain notable impact of poverty on sustainable development. This cites human rights, access to education, social security and the scourge of child labour, because their connection with development is deeply entrenched. It is asserted that achieving



sustainable development depends on eliminating poverty and altering material conditions that enable human, social and economic development, which is largely contingent on the provision of acceptable standards of quality education. Therefore, if poverty remains pervasive as it is, the ambition of realizing sustainable development through fundamental human rights norms will remain a hollow rhetoric. More action should supersede a mere reliance on attractive normative framework.

6 References

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