

Chapter 2

Dimensions of Rural Poverty as Social Problems: Shifting the Analytic Framework and the Poverty Reduction Narrative

ABSTRACT

This chapter uses a sociological approach to tackle poverty as a social problem. As a social problem, sociologists believe poverty is linked to the distribution of wealth and power structures and how political, economic, institutional arrangements, and historical conditions shape our lives and the possibilities to survive in a competitive world. They use analytic framework that shifts from the current popular focus of blaming the victim to addressing the inequalities of the distribution of power, wealth, and opportunity. Second, the chapter broadens the poverty reduction narrative to recognize that studying poverty is not the same thing as studying the poor. This framework turns empirical attention to political, economic, institutional, and historical conditions, as well as the policy decisions that shape the distribution of power and wealth, and interventions that seek to change the conditions of structural inequality and social stratification rather than narrowly focusing on changing the poor.

INTRODUCTION

Rural poverty remains a paradox and an unpleasant fact for millions of people in the world. Issues and questions raised a decade ago remain sensitive and pertinent. Rural poor Malawians, for example, confront multiple severe constraints that can only be addressed by some combination of raising agricultural productivity, diversifying farm output to reduce risk and shift toward higher value outputs, and diversifying livelihoods toward nonfarm enterprises (Ellis, Kutengule & Nyasulu, 2003). See Figure 1. Research findings show that rural poverty is strongly associated with lack of land and livestock, as well as inability to secure nonfarm alternatives to diminishing farm opportunities (Ellis & Bahigwa, 2003). The persisting question is why the inability or lack of capacity to maximize on farm opportunities?

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Why are people poor? Research tells us that rural poor people encounter a ‘public sector institutional context’ that is neutral or blocking rather than enabling them to construct their own pathways out of poverty (Ellis & Mdoe, 2003). In Uganda, for example, rural families encounter a rural taxation regime associated with fiscal decentralization that is inimical to the expansion of monetary opportunities in rural areas (Francis & James, 2003). However, these setbacks are not limited to the African continent. Even the world’s most prosperous economy is stubbornly resistant to all remedies that social scientists have learned about poverty, as well as its “causes, consequences, and curses” (O’Connor, 2009). This means that building a poverty reduction agenda will require a basic change in the ways we as society define, conceptualize or think about the “poverty problem” collectively, a change that begins with a *redirection* in contemporary social scientific poverty knowledge (O’Conner, 2009) and framing of how social programs affect the poor.

Figure 1. Small farmers in Malawi



The purpose of this chapter is twofold. First, the chapter starts a dialog rather than offer precise prescriptions for changes or solutions. The task is to redefine the conceptual basis of what we know about the poverty problem above all by shifting the analytic framework from its current popular focus to explaining and addressing inequalities in the distribution of power, wealth, and opportunity. The second task is to broaden the empirical basis for the study of poverty, (the poverty reduction narrative)—recognizing that studying poverty is not the same thing as studying the poor. At this juncture, we need to turn empirical attention, first to the political, economic, institutional and historical conditions; second to the policy decisions that shape the distribution of power and wealth; and third, to the interventions that seek to change the “conditions of structural inequality rather than narrowly focusing on changing the poor” (O’Connor, 2009, 3).

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