

Critical Reflections: A Critical Analysis of SDG 1: No Poverty

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United Nations Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 1: No Poverty

The United Nations's (UN) first SDG, [No Poverty](#), has a goal to end poverty in all its forms everywhere by 2030. According to the UN, more than 700 million people live in extreme poverty. They struggle to fulfill basic needs such as health care, education, access to clean water, sanitation, and housing. The UN estimates that the COVID pandemic risks reversing decades of progress in the fight against poverty, anticipating that the pandemic could increase global poverty by as much as half a billion people (Sumner et al., 2020). This would be the first time since 1990 that poverty has increased on a global scale, which risks global access to education, human rights, and food security.

When people are not able to access education, employment, healthcare, housing, and services, we all pay the price. **Poverty is a complex social problem that does not have a singular cause, experience, or remedy.** The experience of poverty has considerable variations depending on where you are in the world, and the differences between rich and poor within the borders of a country are vast.

A (Brief) History of Poverty and Welfare

Relief and welfare are not naturally “socialist” or “communist” policies, they are functions of a capitalist welfare state. [Piven and Cloward \(1971\)](#) shows us how welfare and relief are not “new” or progressive liberal policies, they have a deep history in the shift from feudalism to capitalism.

Expansive relief policies were designed to mute civil disorder and regulate the population when famines, crises, and poverty were rampant.

Restrictive relief policies are cyclical (either liberal or restrictive) that are dependent on the problems of larger society that the state aims to regulate.

Piven and Cloward (1971) stress that bureaucratic enclosures of social policies render them as methods of social control by tracing the history of how welfare and relief policies are enacted, distributed, and restricted.

Even what we are currently experiencing - a labour “shortage” and inflation - are all functions of capitalism. **They are not “natural” or “inevitable” consequences, they are manufactured by a socially constructed system.** This is a point that many scholars point to in demonstrating how the “free market” and the illusion of “choice” out of poverty is often not a choice but are managed by the state in the interest of control and capital.

History Example

In the 16th century of Lyon, France, population growth and economic instability with the transition to capitalism led to an increase of poverty and beggary. The transition from feudalism to capitalism resulted in a decline of death rates, and population growth that increased rates of poverty. When food riots occurred, mobs of starving people overran the town. Civil disorder resulted in centralized aid and tickets of relief for food, money, and healthcare. Arrangements for relief were rapidly enacted with modern welfare surveillance tactics to ensure that only the “deserving” poor were receiving aid (Piven and Cloward, 1971). These welfare policies were distributed with additional criminal punishments to beggary, citing that the implementation of relief gave people “no excuse” for beggary (Piven and Cloward, 1971). These punishments included but were not limited to branding, enslavement, and state execution for repeat offenders.

The wealth disparities in “Canada”

Although wealth inequality has remained stable over the past 15 years in “Canada”, disparities continue to grow for certain disadvantaged groups (Maroto, 2016). Wealth is a key component of economic security (Maroto, 2016). **Made-marginalized groups have fewer opportunities for wealth accumulation and lack access to mainstream financial institutions, which leads to cumulative disadvantages (lack of advantage to increase debt returns, no access to credit).** Structural inequality is needed to understand wealth inequality related to assets, debt, and credit market access in Canada. There are 2 key wealth-related outcomes

- (1) home ownership
- (2) family household equivalent net worth.

Disparities in net worth have largely missed analyzing the impact of homeownership on wealth accumulation. Property has cascading effects on wealth distributions, where made-marginalized families face disadvantages.

We can think of the difference between wealth and income in the scenario of job loss. Wealth (a house, investments, stocks) do not disappear when you get fired, whereas a loss of income can be detrimental without a safety net.

This is explained by [Maroto's cumulative advantage/disadvantage theory](#) which predicts growing inequality in relation to one's socioeconomic status, characteristics and allocated resources. It relates how characteristics of having lower education, a disability, an immigrant status, or an Indigenous identity affect your access to wealth. Credit and labour markets interact with cumulative advantage/disadvantage theory by either helping or limiting others, leading to those systematically disadvantaged becoming increasingly less financially secure over time (Maroto, 2016).

Myth Busting and Reframing: “Indigenous peoples don't pay taxes”

Taxes are not a racially neutral mechanism of the state ([Henricks and Seamster, 2016](#)) and people normally associate being a taxpayer with an element of power, legitimacy, goodness, virtue, etc. [Kyle Willmott \(2022\)](#) **argues that the myth that “Indigenous peoples don't pay taxes” is rooted in fiscalized racism and outlines how the “Canadian taxpayer” identity is a form of white property and ownership.** In the context of Indigenous-settler relations, the taxpayer identity is used as a mechanism of settler colonialism to justify Indigenous dispossession (Willmott, 2022).

The myth that “Indigenous peoples don’t pay taxes” justifies policies that reduce Indigenous peoples to subjects to the “taxpayer” that infantilizes them. Being a “taxpayer” then gives settlers the legal, mental, and political vernacular to pronounce, delimit, and eliminate Indigenous political claims, sovereignty, and territories (Willmott, 2022). This gives settlers a sense of ownership and control of “non-tax paying” Indigenous peoples by using the “taxpayer identity” as a form of white property.

Tracing the Genealogy of “Dependency”

Where do we get the idea that “dependency” is negative and “independence” is positive?

Dependency is an ideological term that has assumptions about human nature, gender roles, causes of poverty, nature of citizenship, sources of entitlement, validity of work and contributions to society. The use of the word dependency can individualize, moralize, or psychologize someone through its strong emotive and visual associations to political, social, and economic statuses.

When we trace the origins, history, and use of the word “dependency”, we see how the definition of “dependency” has been contextualized differently in relation to broad institutional, social, and structural shifts ([Fraser and Gordon, 1994](#)). These shifts combined with a historical analysis of linguistic and social changes are traced back to feminist and emancipatory interests. The cultural shift from patriarchal/preindustrial to modern/industrialized usage constructs femininity to dependence that conflates dependency with subordination, femininity, inferiority, and degradation (Fraser and Gordon, 1994).

Before capitalism, all forms of life were woven into a net of dependencies, constituting a single fabric of social hierarchies with relations constrained by moral understandings. **By tracing the genealogy of dependency, we see how the modern emphasis on individual personality constructs a version of independence/dependence that reinforces hierarchies and distinctions of masculine/feminine, public/private, work/care, success/love, individual/community, economy/family, competitive/self-sacrificing**

How do we apply an intersectional feminist lens to understanding poverty, welfare, and dependency?

We borrow from [Patricia Hill Collins \(2000\)](#) to understand how gender is a critical intersection in approaching and analyzing socio-political issues. Specifically, Collins uses the lens of Black feminism to understand political economy, as they pertain to Black women. This allows us to understand race, class, and nation as not just personal identities, but as social hierarchies that shaped Black women's access to status, property, and power in America. The history of Black enslavement in America has long lasting impacts on how Black women have been able or unable to accumulate wealth. Black women were blocked by law from gaining access to assets, property or wealth which enabled them to generate their own income and financial/non-financial support.

Collins (2000) brings us a critical lens to viewing the work/family nexus and Black women's poverty to challenge the framing of work as a public/male domain and the family as a private/female domain. This allows us to see how gender hierarchies affect Black women's income that goes beyond race-based wage discrimination that Black men experience (Collins, 2000). This calls for income equality policies to not address financial inequality only through labour, as it does not examine unpaid family labour and patterns of consumer racism that affects purchasing power (Collins, 2000).

Case Study: The Reality of First Nations Poverty

Death by Poverty by Pam Palmater (2011)

First Nations poverty has been deemed as a crisis - as it has led to many preventable deaths. Mortality rates in First Nations have been linked to social factors of poverty (Palmater, 2011) including lower education, negative discriminatory social interactions, chronic illness, poor overall health, decreased life expectancies, substance abuse, depression, suicide, diabetes, and extreme poverty.

Land is the basis of identity and riches for Indigenous peoples. Colonization has resulted in them becoming the most impoverished due to their lands, resources, ways of life, and more being stolen. Historical colonial and federal laws and policies put First Nations in a state of poverty, which are currently still in place (Palmater, 2011). Palmater (2011) urges that policy makers will not be able to move forward in addressing the crisis of poverty in First Nations until conflicting policy objectives are resolved and addressing First Nations poverty is made an urgent priority.

Canada both defends provisions of the Indian Act that advocate for Native assimilation while claiming to support "Indigenous revitalization" policies, which are fundamentally incompatible. Our federal policies and laws control the lives of First Nations and provide them with inequitable funding that results in poverty and preventable deaths. The First Nations government is underfunded in comparison to provincial services - less than $\frac{2}{3}$ of the federal budget makes it to First Nations (Palmater, 2011).

The federal government of “Canada” uses a 3 step approach to avoiding policy issues with their tactic of “Defer, Deny, and Deflect” (Palmer, 2011).

Defer: The government defers a crisis by calling for additional research and studies, buying them additional time to continue to ignore calls to action.

Deflect: Announcing unrelated projects by offering commentary that blames First Nations for unrelated matters (occurs when deferral does not satisfy the media)

Deny: “Canada” denies problems through litigation and political positions and has a history of ignoring warnings by its own federal officials and research reports.

“Canada” continues to ignore these critical policy problems despite the direct links between discriminatory federal laws, policies, and the crisis of poverty in First Nations. Instead, they blame Indigenous peoples for their own conditions of poverty to alleviate their own responsibility and guilt (Million, 2014). The general public is uneducated about First Nations problems and is swayed by how the media negatively portrays them. The most popular explanation for poverty is blaming the victim. This argues that poor people are “genetically inferior.” Most often, it looks to race/cultural blame to rationalize poverty. **Blaming the victim is easier than confronting the truth that current generations benefit from colonization.** This alleviates the responsibility from “Canada” for making equitable reparations.

Reflection Prompts

1. What would it look like to live with interdependence? How would your life change?
2. How have you seen poverty and welfare portrayed in media/in your life?
3. How do you understand mutual aid? Where in your life does that appear?
4. How have you seen taxes be portrayed in media or in politics? What ideologies do anti-tax or pro-tax sentiments hold? Why do you think that is?

Recommended Readings

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