

THE SHAME OF POVERTY

Transcript of an interview with Robert Walker, Professor of Social Policy



Slum units on high-rise apartments, home to many of the urban poor of China

We're used to thinking about poverty in terms of a lack of resources. Our work has caused us to think much more about the implications of that lack of resources, in terms of how people live their lives, but more particularly, how they think about themselves.

Amartya Sen argued that everywhere there is poverty there is also shame, and we sought out to try and explore it and to check it, to establish whether indeed it was true – which caused us to work in seven very disparate countries; countries as different as Norway, Uganda, Pakistan and China. And the bottom line is that the story was very similar, and when you think about it, it's pretty obvious that it should be.

What do people want to do in life? They want to fulfil their own aspirations, they want to be good parents, they want to have friendships, they want to participate in society. When they can't, for lack of resources, that obviously causes a sense of failure, a sense of shame, which our research suggested was also imposed from outside. So in our dealings with people who are experiencing poverty – as policymakers, as institutions – we tend to stigmatise people who are poor; we tend to blame them for their circumstances, and in so doing we undermine their sense of self and their ability to help themselves.

The challenge of course, working in countries as disparate as Norway and China and Uganda, is whether the words 'shame' and 'poverty' have the same meaning; do they have the same place in the discourse and the conversations of those countries?

And there are cultural nuances. But the overall story was the same: people, globally, are the same; they have very similar aspirations, confront very different constraints. And society globally too is wedded to the notion that success is the product of individual effort, not a result of society collectively working together.

In this last year we have brought those findings together, and published the first of two volumes with Oxford University Press which begin to tell that story from the eyes of the people who experience poverty, but also those who interact with them. It causes us to think about the framing of poverty: how we conceive the problem, how we present the problem, how we engage the public in thinking about the problem. Secondly I think it applies to the design of policy. And finally I think it causes us to think about the delivery of policy. And I guess the way of thinking about that is really to ask each of ourselves, if we were approaching a bureaucracy, an organisation for help, how would we want to be treated?

I've been researching issues to do with disadvantage for 40 years. I've spoken to hundreds of people over that time. Those experiences have left a deep impression and are what motivate me to undertake further research and to engage in the policy process. Our research has already shaped international legislation¹. I worked to lobby individual governments; I joined with the Special Rapporteur from the UN, who has a responsibility for human rights and extreme poverty. She built a case based on human rights. Our research based a case on effectiveness. So the two pincer movements were enough to convince the trade unions, employers and governments that not only was it right to make the changes, but it would lead to more effective policy.

The policies that we've seen have added directly to the pain of people experiencing poverty; the experience of at least 1.4 billion people globally. It's incumbent on us, I think, to respond to these findings. On a day-to-day basis we're making the lives of our fellow citizens much worse, and in many ways we're contributing to the perpetuation of poverty. Building a degree of collective responsibility and collective understanding is the challenge that we face.

Notes:

¹Addition of the principle that governments should have 'respect for the rights and dignity of people covered by the social security guarantees'

Added to: ILO (2012) Recommendation Concerning National Floors of Social Protection, adopted by the Conference at its one hundred and first session, 14th June 2012. Geneva: ILO, Recommendation 202.

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