

Das Verständnis von Armut in einer sich verändernden Gesellschaft  
**Understanding poverty in the changing society**

GBA Forum, 5 May 2010, Kassel, Germany  
Bible text: Luke 10:25-37

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First I want to convey thanks on behalf of the European Baptist Federation (EBF) to German Baptist Aid and to you all for supporting the work with different people in different needs around Europe, Central Asia and the Middle East. This is the area where EBF is working with about 50 member Unions with more than 800,000 church members. A considerable number of these people live in the post-Soviet countries where the societies in general, and the churches, are still struggling with the impact of deep-rooted communist ideology. We have many Baptist churches in the predominantly Muslim countries where living and witnessing as a Baptist can often be life threatening. And we have Baptist communities who live and work in the countries which have recently had military conflicts and as a result, many people live in a constant struggle for their lives and families. In many countries like Georgia, Romania, Lebanon, Turkey, Uzbekistan, Serbia, and others, the Baptist churches have taken the initiative to embody the love of God to the suffering people. It is often difficult because of the limited resources in their countries, and help is needed from the Europe wide Baptist family. Many resources for different projects in those countries come from the German Baptists and the German Baptist churches. This is a great commitment, and I want to say thanks on behalf of all these communities within the EBF whom you are supporting.

The title I was given for this session is 'Understanding poverty in the changing society'. Understanding what poverty means requires engaging with many different areas of human life. I have chosen to look at two issues: (1) who are the poor, and (2) the complex character of poverty. I am looking at those issues in the light of the biblical story about Good Samaritan, which, I believe, is well known to you all. But even here there are questions which I am not able to touch, and about which we need to think more and search for a better understanding. But I hope that these few thoughts I will share with you today can help us when we journey together with God and our neighbours, and that together we can reflect on how we as God's people can embody Christ's love to the suffering world.

*Luke 10:25-37 in German*

Jesus' story about Good Samaritan helps us to reflect on several questions when we talk about poverty in a contemporary society. Who are the poor? What are the reasons for their poverty? Where we can meet the poor? Who needs to reach a helping hand? To whom the helping hand has to be reached – who is the neighbour? What kind of help is needed? Let us look at some of these questions from the perspective of contemporary society.

## The poor – an anonymous group?

The biblical story does not tell us much about the man who was lying on the road from Jerusalem to Jericho. No name, no age, no background, no address, no social status, no information about how long he had been lying on the road, beaten up and robbed. Either were these facts known to the Samaritan who was travelling on the same road and found him there. Without knowing anything about a person, it would have been easy to pass, not to pay attention and not to get involved. And this is what the Priest and Levite did.

Without knowing the person, it is easy to come to a conclusion that the person is there because of his/her own fault – one should not choose a dangerous road without being enough secured... One should not be drunk on the journey, slip and fall dangerously... One should not be lazy and work... One should not be passive and instead everyone should help him/herself... Is this man or woman my neighbour? I know my neighbours but I don't know him...

The poor today are often poor because they have been 'robbed' by social structures like many people in the post-Communist countries, by military conflicts like thousands of people in Georgia, Balkan countries and the Middle East, or by natural catastrophes like the one in Haiti. There can be a 'historic' reason – the children have inherited the poverty from their parents. If the devastating situation has continued for some time, and people have become categorised as 'the poor', it may be very difficult to break out from this 'class' and to make a change by him/herself. We don't know the names or the personal stories of these people. Are they our neighbours?

Bryant L. Myers, a development expert says that in the contemporary society there is a tendency that 'the poor' become an abstract term to talk about people who live in poverty. He says:

'We may forget that the poor are not an abstraction but rather a group of human beings who have names, who are made in the image of God, whose hairs are numbered and for whom Jesus died. The people who live in poverty are as valued, as important, as loved as those who do not.'<sup>1</sup>

The fact that the Samaritan did not know anything personal about the man who was lying on the road was not a reason for him to bypass, or simply to throw a coin in case the man was to wake up some time. Would the Priest have stopped if he had recognised in the lying man his brother? Would the Levite reached his helping hand if he had realised that the man belonged to his family? Would they have cared more for their religious purity than for their family members?

It is easy to bypass and not to care if you don't know who the people are – if they are not your family members, if they don't go to the same church, or if they are not fellow Baptist brothers and sisters. But Jesus' story about Good Samaritan challenges us to break out from our own familiar communities and to see every human being as someone valuable and important. Even if we don't know their names and their stories,

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<sup>1</sup> Bryant L. Myers, *Walking With The Poor: Principles and Practices of Transformational Development* (Orbis Books: New York, 1999), p57

it does not mean that they don't have one. And they are known to God.

Myers points out another danger of viewing the poor as an abstract anonymous group of people:

'The poor become nameless, and this invites us to treat them as objects of our compassion, as a thing to which we can do what we believe is the best.'<sup>2</sup>

They become statistics and an object for social programmes. We call them unemployed, homeless, refugees, marginalised groups without thinking of their individual characteristics and gifts given by God. They become an object for non-poor to exercise power over them. We talk about 200 homeless people coming to the soup kitchen, and we feel good about feeding them. We have done something good. But is soup the only thing that can really help them to change their lives? Michael Taylor, a Baptist minister in the UK, development expert and previous Director of Christian Aid say:

Charity... is not a way of changing things but of keeping them as they are, and all the more efficiently because of its apparent benevolence.<sup>3</sup>

Practicing charity is important, but the danger of leaving 'anonymous' people dependent on the acts of charity needs to be recognised and dealt with. When the poor are reduced from names to abstractions, their poverty has been made even greater – they have been left in isolation feeling that they belong to a different 'class' from that of their helpers. They have been given something but they have not been recognised as 'neighbours' to have fellowship with and to work with. As example of how charity might continue towards development are many Christian running soup kitchens where the helpers have started building relationships with those in need of help in order to listen to their stories, to help them to sort out their debts, to help in restoring their documents and finding work. And even if everything does not work out practically, relationships built like this matter, and encourage people to continue the journey and struggle to look for ways out of poverty.

The Jewish law expert asked from Jesus the question: 'Who is my neighbour?' What are the limits? Is it to include only the people I know - my community, the people of Israel? Does it also include strangers, Samaritans, Gentiles? Does it include women, people with disabilities, poor, lepers and others normally excluded? Ultimately it becomes a question about whom does God love.

Answering the question Jesus tells the parable and then turns the question upside down, asking: 'Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbour to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?' Not 'who is my neighbour?' but 'to whom I am a neighbour?' Doing this, Jesus makes us realise that in human community every human person is 'a neighbour' and carries the potential of being a helper as well as of being helped. It breaks down the hierarchy of helper and helped and gives us an equal

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<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> Michael Taylor, *Eat, Drink and Be Merry, for Tomorrow We Live: Studies in Christianity and Development* (London: T&T Clark International, 2005), p54

position before God.<sup>4</sup>

The beginning of 1990s was a very devastating time for the people in Balkan countries. During several military conflicts people were made redundant, they lost their homes, and often family members. Serbia received many refugees from Croatia and Bosnia but the life was not easier there because the war had ruined the country and its social structures. This time several free churches, including the Baptist church, started helping the refugees with food, clothing and shelter. In the beginning they worked hard to respond to the immediate needs of the refugees. But soon they realised that this was not enough. The bowl of soup finished but the situation of people was the same. As the work grew, they formed an organisation called Bread of Life. And they started building relationships over a shared meal, they tried to find their family members lost in the war, they connected refugees with potential employers and formed groups to connect people with each other and to have fellowship. Živana (the lady on the picture) was one of those being helped, and today she belongs to the Belgrade Baptist church and is one of the ladies working as a volunteer in Bread of Life. She is responsible for the programme for elderly helping them in many practical ways, building relationships and keeping company for those who are lonely. In one hand she embodies the 'robbed man', having gone through the war disasters and ending up in poverty in a foreign country. On the other, she embodies 'the Good Samaritan' helping others. I think this is a great example of what can happen when our work with the poor is not built on the hierarchy of helpers and of those helped, and acknowledges the gifts God has given to each person.

### **Poverty's complex character**

Let us come back to the story of Good Samaritan for a moment. The robbed man was lying in a lonely place on the road which was not used by many people because it was known as a dangerous road. He was unconscious without being able to ask for help or to explain what had happened – he was voiceless. He was powerless to help himself – being dangerously injured there were only two options – to die or to be helped by someone else. And he had nothing – all he had was gone.

When in the past poverty was mainly seen as the 'absence of things'<sup>5</sup>, then Robert Chambers, a British development expert, describes different dimensions of poverty which are similar to the situation of the robbed man on the road. Although Chambers describes the different dimensions in the context of rural household, the core of those principles is applicable also in the urban context.

Robert Chambers sees poverty as entanglement<sup>6</sup> – something where people and households are trapped in several reasons and in order to change something, the full complexity needs to be addressed. It is not only a bowl of soup that helps the poor to get their lives onto the better tracks.

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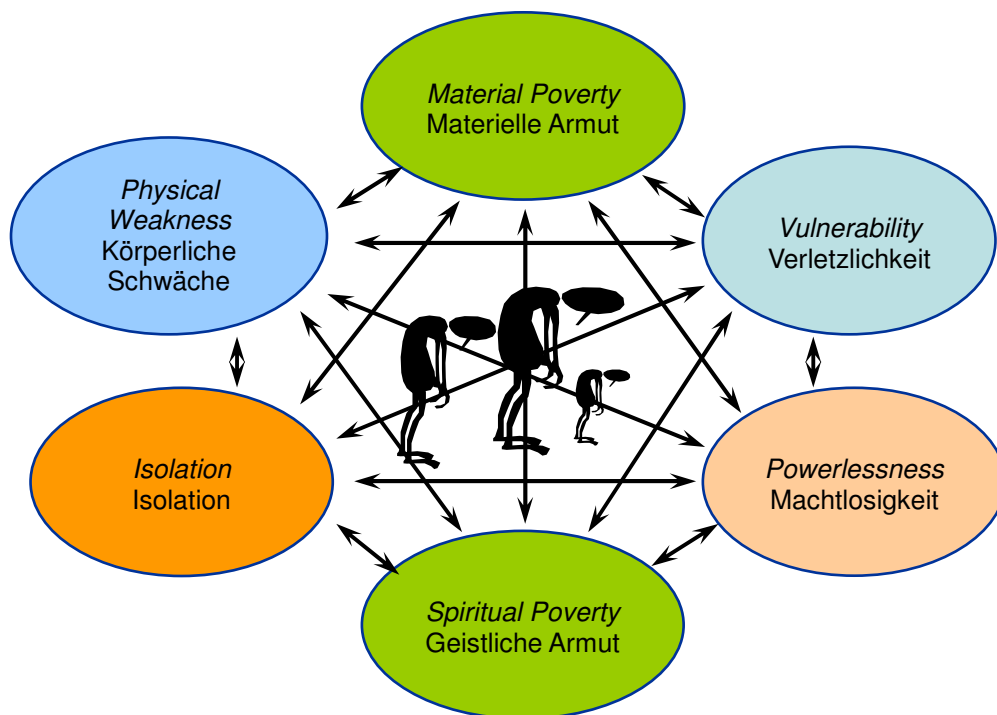
<sup>4</sup> William Loader, <http://wwwstaff.murdoch.edu.au/~loader/LkPentecost7.htm>

<sup>5</sup> Bryant L. Myers, *Walking With The Poor*, p12

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, pp66-69

Chambers identifies 5 different dimensions of poverty<sup>7</sup> to which Myers adds the sixth<sup>8</sup>:

1. Material poverty: lack of assets
2. Physical weakness: people lack strength because of poor health, and inadequate nutrition
3. Isolation: people lack access to services and information
4. Vulnerability: people have few buffers against emergencies or disasters, they lack choices and options
5. Powerlessness: people lack the ability and the knowledge to influence the life around it and the social systems in which they live. In corrupt societies it is often the non-poor – police, politicians, landowners, businessman – who use their power to ‘rob’ the poor as the poor lack resource to justice because of lack of education and access to legal help. But powerlessness of the poor can be also a result of the helping agencies that give exactly as much as it is needed to stay alive but do not engage with empowering the poor so that they could take care of their own lives.
6. Spiritual poverty: people suffer from broken and dysfunctional relationships with God, each other, the community and the creation. They may lack hope and be unable to believe that change is possible. They have never experienced the transforming power of the gospel.



Myers, developing further Chambers theory and engaging with other development experts, comes to a conclusion that ‘the nature of poverty is fundamentally relational’ where all these different dimensions need to be equally acknowledged and dealt with.<sup>9</sup> Stating this, he is challenging the aid agencies but first of all churches to engage with the poor holistically so that their lives could be transformed physically, mentally,

<sup>7</sup> Robert Chambers, *Rural Development: Putting the Last First* (London: Longman Group, 1983), pp103-139

<sup>8</sup> Bryant L. Myers, *Walking With The Poor*, pp67-69. Explanations to the six points are given by B. L. Myers.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, pp86-88

socially and spiritually.

### **Conclusion**

Jesus did not tell in his story whether the life of the robbed man was transformed. Maybe he did not do this because transformation of lives is ultimately in God's hands. But he told what was needed by a fellow human being in order to embody God's Kingdom in the suffering world and to build a community where God can exercise his power – the power of love which crosses the boundaries and builds relationships.

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### **Discussion Questions**

1. Is the primary task of Christian communities to deal with the immediate symptoms of poverty or to campaign for the justice for the poor?
2. What is the relationship between evangelism and empowering the poor so that they can take care of their own lives?