



The Concept 'Poverty' towards Understanding  
in the Context of Developing Countries '*Poverty qua Poverty*':  
with Some Comparative Evidence on Britain

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**Abstract**

The major problem facing developing countries is poverty; therefore, this paper attempts to conceptualise poverty in the context of developing countries. The paper provides an absolute definition of the concept as suitable for the poverty situation in developing countries, what this paper coins the term *poverty qua poverty* to explain. Four works (Sandbrook, 1982; Oppenheim, 1993; Spicker, 1992 and Alcock, 1997) were reviewed extensively in an attempt to resolve some controversy surrounding the understanding of the concept 'poverty', while reference made to the works of other scholars in less detail. This paper employs some comparative evidence with Britain (which obviously eliminated poverty at absolute level '*poverty qua poverty*' as far back as at the end of 1950s) on this subject in order to achieve its conceptual analytical effects.

**Keywords:** Poverty qua poverty, Governance, Development, Sub-Saharan Africa, Britain

**1. Introduction**

Generally, recognising what something means in practice is much easier than defining or analysing it, this has made many writers explain concepts with illustrative examples rather than giving tight definitions. Spicker attests to the above submission when he notes:

When we say that people are poor, deprived, suffering from hardship, or in need, we usually have a fairly good idea of what we mean. But words like this may well mean different things to different people, and it is difficult to take this kind of ordinary language and make it perform the precise functions that are required in social analysts (Spicker, 1992).

Therefore, before considering various definitions of poverty as provided by writers and scholars, it will be helpful to comment on certain contentious issues surrounding the concept 'poverty' in order to understand it. There are so many writers, who have written on the issue of poverty (for example Hoogeveen & Ozler (2006); Bhorat, H and Kanbur, R (2006); Greer and Thorbecke (2001); Alcock, Peter (1997); Oppenheim, Carry (1993); Sandbrook, R (1982) that it is impossible to cover all of their works. In this study, my concentration will be on a few of these works (Sandbrook, 1982; Oppenheim, 1993; Spicker, 1992 and Alcock, 1997), because they are very helpful in understanding Britain's poverty, which is divergent to poverty situation in developing countries, though other works will also be commented on in less detail.

**2. Existing Debates**

The major argument of most of these works are centred on the various existing debates on the 'problem of understanding poverty', and of the policies that have been developed in response. It is clear from the analyses of these works that there is no one scientific and universally agreed definition of poverty. This is because, depending on the perception of the writers, it is a political, as well as socio-economic concept. As Alcock states: 'it is the issue of definition that lies at the task of understanding poverty, we must first know what poverty is before we can begin to do anything to measure it and before we can begin to do anything to alleviate it' (Alcock, 1997). This statement depicts the indubitable problem of finding a definition of poverty.

*2.1 On relative or absolute definition of poverty*

There is a serious controversy among these writers over whether the definition of poverty should be absolute or relative. While Alcock appears to favour the relative, Oppenheim agrees that both should be synthesised in the definition of poverty. However, Sandbrook argues in support of a definition of poverty that is absolute.

Oppenheim begins by citing the words made in Faith in the City:

Poverty is not about shortage. It is about rights and relationships; about how people are treated and how they regard themselves; about powerlessness, exclusion and loss of dignity. Yet, the lack of an adequate income is at its heart (Oppenheim, 1993: 28).

Oppenheim continues,

An absolute definition of poverty assumes that it is possible to define a minimum standard of living based on a person's needs and not on broader social and cultural needs. Absolute poverty is when people fall below this level-when they cannot house, clothe or feed themselves (ibid: 28).

As Oppenheim points out, Seebohm Rowntree used such a definition in his study of poverty in York in 1889, when he devised a 'primary' poverty line based on a standard of minimum needs for food, clothing, heating and rent, to show that many families had incomes below this level. Oppenheim maintains that such an absolute view of poverty is still a definition valued by many commentators (Ibid, those commentators include Joseph, 1976; Taylor, 1990 and Roll, 1992).

In Oppenheim's definition of 'relative poverty', an excerpt from the same report, Faith in the City was cited:

Poor people in Britain are not, of course, as poor as those in the Third World. But their poverty is real enough none the less. For poverty is a relative, as well as an absolute concept. It exists, even in relatively rich western societies, if people are denied access to what is generally regarded as a reasonable standard and quality of life in that society (Oppenheim, ibid: 67)

Oppenheim noted that in this instance poverty is defined in relation to a generally accepted standard of living in a specific society at a specific time and goes beyond basic biological needs. Oppenheim is of the view that this aspect of poverty has a long heritage, having been shared by people across the political spectrum; and gives the example of Lady Chalker's statement: 'it is not sufficient to assess poverty by absolute standards; nowadays it must be judged on relative criteria by comparison with the standard of living of other groups in the community...beneficiaries must have an income which enable them to participate in the life of the community' (ibid: 9).

## *2.2 On measurement of poverty*

Another area of contention is how poverty could be measured, and the question of drawing the line of measuring poverty. Oppenheim cites Meghnad Desai's 'Excluding the Poor' (1986): 'Measuring poverty is an exercise in demarcation. Lines have to be drawn where none may be visible and they have to be made bold. Where one draws the line is itself a battle field'. In response to this, two possible poverty lines were debated. While Sandbrook argues for the use of the poverty line based on low income families (LIF - The numbers of people living on, below or just above the supplementary benefit income support level), to that based on the household below Average Incomes (50% of average income after housing costs as a proxy for the poverty line), both Alcock and Oppenheim see the above two demarcating points (poverty lines) as useful. These lines were used by Child Poverty Action Group (CPAG) in 1972-85 in United Kingdom. A brief analysis on the distinction between Relative and Absolute poverty will be helpful in understanding the debate.

An 'absolute poverty line' aims to define a minimum standard, usually based on a needs assessment, such as the cost of a basket of food items that provide a basic level of nutrition. It is a fixed measure, an income or expenditure threshold below which a household is seen as poor; the threshold remains the same even if there is a change with a rising standard of living in a country. Thus, economic growth distributed uniformly across society will result in a decreasing poverty rate, as households that were previously considered poor climb above the poverty line. Greer and Thorbecke note that this fixed quality of an absolute poverty line is particularly useful in informing policy, because it provides a stipulated target for poverty interventions. They maintain that policy-makers can assess the impact of current or proposed social assistance programmes by using an absolute poverty datum line to measure changes in the poverty rate. Furthermore, they argue that an absolute poverty line may be a more accurate measure of commodity deprivation than a relative measure, as it is often directly linked to consumption of specific basic items. Whether a household or individual consumes enough of basic needs (food) may arguably be a more accurate and intuitive measure of impoverishment than where the individual falls on the income distribution (Greer and Thorbecke in Mlambo 2001:4).

A relative poverty line according to Wooland and Leibbrandt can be defined as that income level that cuts off the specified poorest percentage of the population. The poor are those persons who suffer deprivation relative to others in the poverty domain. They provide as an example that the World Bank generally defines the 'poor' as the bottom forty percent of households, and defines the 'destitute' as the bottom twenty-percent of the income distribution. And that relative poverty line is generally more widely used than the absolute poverty line, as it is much easier to construct. Furthermore, they maintain that calculations using the relative poverty line are less likely to be controversial, as they

avoid the subjectivity associated with determining what income or expenditure threshold constitutes a minimal acceptable standard of living (Wooland and Leibbrandt, 1999)

### *2.3 On causes of poverty*

There is also a keen debate on the causes of poverty that affects its conceptualisation. Oppenheim (1993) identified such causes as unemployment, the cost of bringing up children, disability, sickness and old age. Alcock (1997) mentioned such causes of poverty as the dynamics of deprivation, pathological causes, structural causes and ideological perspectives. Sandbrook (1998), generally, opined that it is the neglect of what he referred to as the 'basic need approach' that causes poverty, that is to say, the need for the essentials of life such as food, shelter and clothing.

### *2.4 On history of poverty*

Another area of argument that affects the concept is on the history of poverty. Alcock (op cit), states that 'it is possible to extend the history of poverty as far back as the history of society itself, but most of those writing historically about poverty (in Britain) trace the current development of poverty and poverty policy from the period of gradual replacement of feudalism by capitalism as the modern economy began to develop in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries'. This is because during this period many were separated from land, and depended on wages from paid labour, but those who could not work for wages could not support themselves and thus were destitute. Making reference to Novak's book on history of poverty in Britain, he argues that it is only at this point that poverty was created as an academic concept (Novak, 1988). Sandbrook (op cit), in exploring the historical root of the poverty problem in urban Africa, contends that, 'the imbalance between productive employment and the burgeoning labour force is a facet of the process of underdevelopment'. For more analysis on this issue, see the 'stagnation thesis' as expounded by Baran (1957) in his 'Political Economy of Growth', and others, such as Frank (1971) who specifically developed the idea of Capitalism and 'Underdevelopment' (the notion of moving backwards).

## **3. Criticisms**

Having presented a brief summary of the predominant arguments in some of the existing literature in order to understand the concept of poverty, I will proceed to forward a few constructive criticisms, and as well, pose a few relevant questions based on their analyses, particularly on the importance of employment.

### *3.1 The importance of employment*

My first criticism would be levelled on the work of Alcock (op cit: 12), particularly about his view that 'employment has never of course been a guaranteed means of avoiding poverty'. Though he cited in support of this claim the studies of Bowley and Burnelt Hurst, I want to point out that rationally employment is of course a means of avoiding poverty both in policy and practice, so long as the pay received is not derisory. This view becomes glaring when we appreciate that unemployment is the greatest cause of poverty the world over. Oppenheim (op cit: 56) attests to this view himself, when he notes 'unemployment means poverty'. In support of this statement, he argues 'Daniel found that unemployment, however brief, caused both hardship and trauma. When people were asked in a study in Britain, how they viewed their experience of unemployment, the group as a whole ranked it close to the worst experience they had endured' (Daniel, 1990).

This argument holds ground because even where wages are low, or people are underemployed, they are guaranteed a living wage. Even, peasants and farmers could be said to be some how employed, considering the important of self-employment to an economy, especially when we appreciate that there could be payment made in kind. But the true position is that only peasants who earn wages, that is rural proletariat or peasants who in addition to their toiling in the land earn some money from additional day-labouring. In other words, only wage labourers can be unemployed. In line with this view, it is worth noting that the peasants or the labouring poor that are unsure of any wages face critical problems, particularly in many developing countries of Africa, where the so called social welfare packages for the non-wage earners is lacking. Their condition is pathetic because even those who are well positioned (the rich or the high; the political elites/class) are not ready to help the poor peasants.

Duodu (1967) writes about these problems of the peasants in developing countries (this class - the peasants or labouring poor, range from the petty producers, to petty traders and providers of petty services, casual labourers, subsistence farmers, urban cultivators, and illicit and parasitical occupations – prostitutes, bootleggers, dope-peddlers, beggars and petty thieves), with reference to Ghana, in his work 'The Gab Boys':

The fact was that so far as we low, uneducated people were concerned, they were all the same; they enjoyed the same things though they attached labels to one another. None of them ever thought of giving up some of their privileges so that we could enjoy a little ourselves. They had, and we didn't have; (i.e. money, power, wealth etc) and the words they talked (i.e. their decisions/policies) were meaningless to us. Neither communasocialism nor neocoloscienism (imposing) meant that somebody would stop people dying because they didn't have money to go to hospital; or prevent them from living in houses without ceilings, where ten people had to share one room; or give to public toilets and water

supplies the same attention as to income tax and propaganda.... They did not mean the coming of a time when there would be no more 'high' or 'low' but only people – the people of Ghana (ibid).

Alcock (p.12) himself disclosed that 'many of those who are poor and out of work are far from feckless idlers revelling in dependency. They are 'looking for- and hoping for – work, but are unable to find it' (the very fact that they are searching for work, shows that there is something greener in employment). The views of some authorities can be used to buttress this criticism. For instance, in his listing of certain guidelines which serve to identify the greatest concentration of poverty, McConnell (1969) stated that a very high percentage of the families of the unemployed and partially employed are living in poverty. Employment provides the individual with the chance, at least, of overcoming absolute poverty (because the chances are that one would be in a position to take control of immediate basic needs). Absolute poverty will be the concentration of this study: absolute poverty in its practical sense – '*poverty qua poverty*'.

The weight of this criticism is better appreciated in the ugly and deplorable situations in the developing countries, where the greatest numbers of the poor are related to unemployment. This is worse in the case where the unemployed receive no social security benefits, as obtainable in virtually all developing countries (which is generally the case in Africa). Thus the lamentation of Justice Aguda (1998):

I take it as most inhuman and degrading for an able-bodied man and woman willing and able to work to find himself or herself a victim of unabated and frustrating prolonged unemployment. Such a situation leads progressively from optimism to pessimism and from pessimism to fatalism... when that stage of helplessness and failure is reached that surely must be a state of torture (ibid).

Even in the developed world, in a country like Britain where there are reasonable benefits for the unemployed, 'benefits for the unemployed have generally required recipients to demonstrate that whilst receiving state support they are also seeking employment' (Alcock, op cit: 12). This statement reveals the importance of getting employed, at least, in order to alleviate *poverty qua poverty*. Seers (1969: 4) also points out that '...to be chronically unemployed, to be chronically dependent on another person's productive capacity, even for food, is incompatible with self-respect'.

#### **4. The Term Poverty qua poverty and its Application to Sub-Saharan Africa**

For application to Africa, Alcock's and Oppenheim's definitions of poverty as relative poverty are also questionable. A relative conceptualisation could not be used to define what I refer to as '*poverty qua poverty*' (*PQP*), that is the poverty situation in the developing countries, essentially that of Africa. Anyone who is in absolute poverty (*poverty qua poverty*) is more or less being blindfolded by its devastating state or impact, and therefore quite oblivious to relative poverty. By this concept of *poverty qua poverty*, poverty also means hunger, thirst, poor health and living without decent shelter. Extensively it means not being able to read. It means chronic sickness. It means not finding any opportunities for you or your children; it is about being pushed around by those who are more powerful.

*Poverty qua poverty* (*PQP*) is the term I coin to describe the practical absolute poverty of Africa, particularly Sub-Saharan Africa where the majority find life very excruciating because it is difficult to meet or satisfy their basic needs, such as food, clothing, shelter, health and education. Those in *poverty qua poverty* are the people who experience such persistent poverty that it is almost impossible to break free of it using their own resources. They hardly have enough to eat, now about to save. They are reliant on day labouring. They have no education and few assets. Their entire futures appear to be bleak. Indeed, many of them feel frustrated and worthless, seeing little or no prospect of escaping their wretched lives.

Let us take a look at the following illustrations. About one-sixth of the people living in Sub-Saharan Africa are in *poverty qua poverty* (Report of the Commission for Africa, 2005: 101). In Ethiopia, for example, these families are known as 'those who cook water'. In Ghana, they are called 'those with two bags' – one for begging in the hungry season, and another for begging in the season of plenty. In Nigeria they are seen as those who patch a living: 'patching poverty'.

A relative definition of poverty, Alcock (p.69) explains, is associated in particular with Fabian critics of the post war achievement of the welfare state in eliminating poverty in Britain: 'although state benefits had provided enough to prevent subsistence poverty, for most, in terms of their position relative to the average standard of living in society.... Thus, in a society growing in affluence, as was post war Britain, remaining as far behind the average as before continued to constitute poverty'.

My conceptualisation of poverty in the developing countries concentrates on absolute poverty, because the idea of relative poverty, which relates to post war Britain and other developed countries, is relevant because in these countries poverty has been eliminated at the absolute level. Alcock (p.69), citing Booth (1889) and Rowntree (1901), makes reference to Secretary of State John Moore's statement in 1989, as regards to the elimination of poverty (at subsistence level) in Britain when he noted that 'The evidence of improving living standards over this country is dramatic, and it is incontrovertible. When the pressure group says that one-third of the population is living in poverty, they cannot be saying that one third of people are living below the draconian subsistence levels'. This statement was made by John

Moore, in 1989, but was cited by Alcock (1997: 68). Moore, was the then Secretary of State for social security in Britain, and in his speech called 'the end of the line of poverty', he castigated relative notions of poverty as 'bizarre', because they seemed to be suggesting that as poverty was related to average standard of living, it would continue to exist, no matter how wealthy a country becomes. Yes, I agree in totality with John Moore, (Though, some may argue that this may be a political statement, in practice the impact is greatly felt) because relative poverty is a 'mirage'. In other words, you cannot surmount or eliminate diametrically relative poverty, but absolute poverty in the developing countries (*poverty qua poverty*) can be completely addressed if conscientious and practical approach is employed, as it follows; the case of Britain has shown.

Moore's statement however is consistent with Seers position. Seers (op cit: 7-8) noted that the explanation (for the elimination of this absolute poverty) lies largely in the fact that by about 1950 the great economic problems had been brought under control in the industrial countries. Unemployment had been reduced to historically very low levels; absolute poverty in the sense I use the word had been largely eliminated. The reason according to Seers is that these countries benefited from world economic leadership and political power. These social scientists in Britain stretching over more than a century such as Booth, Rowntree, Boyd-Orr, the Webbs, Keynes, Beveridge and Tawney, concentrated sharply on poverty and its corollaries – unemployment and inequality. Sub-Saharan African countries should first concentrate in providing the basic needs of the masses; this is an indispensable stepping stone for other development efforts.

It is Sandbrook's position, therefore, that appears more reasonable to me, understandably because he carried out his study in the developing countries of Africa and therefore had a personal knowledge of the plight of African poor. Sandbrook (op cit: 3-4), commenting on the notion of absolute or 'subsistence poverty' was of the view that 'the poor comprise those households whose income falls below a level necessary to satisfy the basic needs of their members in housing, nutrition, and clothing. Any stipulation of basic needs will of course be arbitrary to a degree, but it will at least provide some rough measure of the dimensions of human misery'. Sandbrook observed that Tropical Africa contains a disproportionate share of the world's poor, whether these are defined by reference to absolute or relative standards.

Sandbrook (ibid: 3), cited the World Bank to support his argument. In the World Bank's view, for instance, the 'absolute poor' in 1975 included 'those individuals with an annual international purchasing power of under \$279. While 53 per cent of the world's absolute poor lived in densely populated South Asia, the next highest portion, 20 per cent, resided in Sub-Saharan Africa. Approximately half of the latter region's total population was absolute poor'. So, while relative poverty may be used to characterise all countries, whether developed or developing, absolute poverty (*poverty qua poverty*) is a major feature of developing countries. And this is where this paper, therefore concentrates.

Though absolute and relative poverty are not the same, I believe that the poor think about the relativity of their poverty when they have surmounted the problem of absolute poverty. Even Alcock (op cit: 8) himself indirectly admitted this '... What is more, people at the bottom of income distribution in Britain may not see themselves as poor, particularly, if they make comparison with those elsewhere in the world who face starvation and destitution...' As argued, for Africa *poverty qua poverty* captures the notion of poverty well: I thus proffer that this term be used for the poor in Africa.

In relation to the poverty situation in Nigeria, South Africa and other developing countries, the relative aspect of poverty holds little or no weight in comparison to the case of Britain. Just as Sandbrook writes, the International Labour Organisation (ILO) economists have in practice been willing to offer their own definitions of absolute poverty which concerns the present poverty problem of developing countries and which fits with the absolute definition for it relates to fulfilling the immediate needs. Sandbrook quoting the ILO:

Material basic needs include certain minimum levels of private consumption of food, clothing and shelter, such as pure water, sanitation, public transport, and health and education facilities. Technocrats have expended considerable efforts in seeking to quantify these needs and to establish national and international targets for each, but these rather arid exercise cannot detain us here.... The rationale for a preoccupation with the fulfilment of material needs is quite simple: these are foundation of all other human needs because their satisfaction is essential for survival. (Sandbrook, op cit: 2). All 'other human needs' include overcoming the relative poverty, which I say is a mirage.

Seers puts it this way; 'As undernourishment, unemployment and inequality dwindle, these educational and political aims become increasingly important objectives of development. Later still, freedom from repressive sexual codes, from noise and pollution, become major aims. But this would not override the basic economic priorities, at least for really poor countries, with large numbers of undernourished children' (p.6).

Spicker (op cit: 10) also agrees when he argues 'it should be supposed, though, that the idea of 'poverty' is used indiscriminately, or that it does not really mean anything. People may disagree about the nature of poverty, but there are cases in the Third World – cases where people are without food, clothing or shelter – where there is hardly any disagreement, and which in many ways are paradigmatic of poverty'. This is what I mean by absolute poverty: *poverty qua poverty*.

I believe that some 'open questions' remain in the poverty debate. Though all the commentators (academics and campaigners) as cited by Alcock were of British origin, or from other rich countries, I wonder whether commentators on the 'poverty debate' who are from developing countries (especially in Africa), would see themselves as not being poor or rather, being very much unwilling to accept having experienced poverty practically all their lives because of the stigma it carries. As Alcock explains:

To perceive oneself as poor, of course, is to put oneself within an undesirable or negative situation – to be the victim of an unacceptable state of affairs. Those who are poor by some objective criteria may therefore, understandably not want to identify themselves and their experience with such a negative, exclusionary and even stigmatising situation. It might not be much comfort to admit to being poor... (p.8). In the proper sense, these academic and commentators that were previously poor, before succeeding in life, would rather be proud to say that they were poor, but through determined efforts have surmounted their poverty. This confession will act as an engine of inspiration and motivation to the poor, particularly the younger ones that are down there struggling to make it in life.

I do not know to what extent other commentators in the politics of poverty from the developing countries, especially Africa, and specifically Nigeria and South Africa, would agree with Alcock's view. As for my individual perspective, I would not mind admitting that I have experienced absolute poverty merely for the consequential reason of avoiding stigmatisation relating to poverty (it is even unethical to stigmatise the poor). When, even in practice, virtually all developing countries will admit that absolute poverty has not been eliminated in their society; in order to receive the assistance of international community in form of poverty alleviation. Do you think that poor nations have better standard of living than rich nations? In fact, since the answer is 'No', it is when one admits that one has a problem, and explains the nature of the problem, that such a problem would be looked into and hopefully solved, with the person's involvement. For example, if African countries had pretended that they are not poor (this paper recognises that countries in Africa are not equally poor), in order to avoid stigmatisation, the level of pro-poor programmes (under the global poverty campaign) already embarked upon by international community, like debt relief, investments on provision of social amenities, and others would not have been possible. Though, it needs to be emphasised that these pro-poor programmes are highly inadequate, but would have gone a long way to minimizing the absolute poverty in Africa, but the situation is worsened and compounded because of weak governance.

The fact is that 'poverty' does not describe a particular kind of attribute that people do or do not have; the term is used to describe a range or cluster of conditions. A person starving in Uganda, a discharged motor accident victim (from a hospital) living in a derelict house because there is nowhere else to go, a Nigerian farmer, a South African single parent trapped in an isolated council estate, or a pensioner unable to afford heating, might all be said to be experiencing 'poverty' (be poor) in some sense, but it is not necessary to suppose that they are all poor in exactly the same sense. The kinds of problems they face, the reasons for those problems, and the sorts of response that have to be made, may well be different. That is not to say that the problems are not interrelated, but they are not all alike, either, and conditions found at one edge of the cubicle may appear, on a closer examination, to have little directly in common with features found at the other end. In fact, conditions regarded as 'poor', cannot be brought into one tight compartment (Alcock, 9). As opposed to the above (relative) description and as stressed above, the aspect of poverty that borders this paper is that with common features such as lack of food, clothing, health and shelter: *poverty qua poverty*.

In practice, poverty has been variously measured and not surprisingly so given the above discussion. As an Oxfam (2003) report points out 'Poverty is complex and multidimensional, and has various perceptions. It is experienced differently by men and by women and can differ according to geographical area, social group, and political or economic context. Therefore, it is safe to agree that the poor are not a homogenous group'.

Numerous assessment indices can be used to determine income levels and human poverty, and therefore enable us categorise individuals in terms of their poverty ranking. This is based on assessing the Income-Expenditures Poverty as carried out by the World Bank, and that of Human Development and Human Poverty (i.e. human deprivation, as carried out by UNDP). For example a measure of income inequality within a country is calculated by the Gini Index. When the Gini Coefficient is close to 1, it means that a great proportion of the national income is eluding the poor. The Human Development Index (HDI) measure the incidence of human poverty in a country; while the Human Poverty Index (HPI) concentrates on calculating deprivation in terms of 'longevity', 'knowledge', and 'standard of living'. The Gender Development Index (GDI) assesses disparities between males and females in relation to the HDI result. The closer to the HDI, the lower the gender disparity prevailing in a country, while the Gender Empowerment Index (GEM) measures the gender inequality in economic and political opportunities in a country; for a detail explanation (Oxfam, Ibid).

Citing the United Nations Development Programme, Oxfam warns of the danger of discounting a hierarchy of poverty which demands the identification and inclusion of all sections of society; the report observes that general strategies for alleviation may not incorporate the needs of all poor people. According to the report, the poorest among the poor are, people who are the worst in terms of physiological deprivation, suffering from income poverty, social exclusion and a lack of freedom. The report concludes with a definition of the poor as those who are unemployed and are unskilled,

whose daily meals cannot be guaranteed except with the assistance of others because their incomes are extremely low or nil (ibid).

Onibokun and Kumuyi (1996) argue that 'poverty is linked to a shortage of vital breakdown of economic, demographic, ecological, cultural and social systems and bad governance'. Chelliah and Sudarshan (1999) note that there has been much debate about how exactly poverty should be defined. However, they argue that 'in popular understanding, poverty is identified with lowness of income which prevents a family from obtaining and enjoying the basic necessities of life, food, clothing, shelter and water'. They see the above conceptual definition as income-poverty and informed us that for a more comprehensive picture of poverty, those other deprivation, such as in relation to health, education, sanitation and insurance against mishaps, must be taken into account (ibid).

The World Bank (online) measures poverty in relation to the proportion of the developing world's population living in the extreme economic poverty as 'living on less than \$1 per day'; (and \$1.08 in 1993 dollars adjusted to account for differences in purchasing power across countries). In the World Bank's view, 'poverty is also hunger, poverty is lack of shelter, poverty is being sick and not being able to see a doctor' (ibid).

Ask poor people themselves what poverty means to them and these are the answers they give: Poverty means hunger, thirst, and living without decent shelter. It means not being able to read. It means chronic sickness. Poverty means not finding any opportunities for you or your children; it is about being pushed around by those who are more powerful. It is about having little control over your life. And it can mean living with the constant threat of personal violence (Narayan, Petesch and Shah, 2001).

In summary, what is striking is that some of these views incorporate some aspects that emphasise relative poverty, while others are absolute definitions, (this include Chelliah, Sudarshan, World Bank, Sachs and People's definitions), which is the lack of basic necessities of life, such as food, clothing, shelter, health and water, as well as extremely low income. It is an understanding of the meaning and dimensions of poverty along this framework, and the numerous challenges on all its dimensions, that compel me to employ the absolute definition approach to explaining African poverty (*poverty qua poverty*).

The conceptualisation of poverty in this perspective (absolute or *poverty qua poverty*) is supported by Sachs. Sachs, while commending Malaysia's success recently in the fight against poverty, said that by 2010 poverty would be a thing of the past in Malaysia, but he was quick to clarify that he was only talking about erasing 'extreme poverty' and not relative poverty. Sachs explained that extreme poverty meant living in an environment without food security, clean water, sanitation, basic health service, literacy and basic income (in Yeow, 2007, online). Sachs further observed that 'it can serve as an example for other developing nations, especially sub-Saharan Africa'. That is to say, Sachs was emphasising on the elimination of poverty in Africa on absolute terms (*poverty qua poverty*) not relative; this is the position of this paper (ibid). It is this *poverty qua poverty* that causes conflict and other instability in most African countries (for the relationship between poverty, conflict and development, see Ikejiaku, 2009).

For most people in Africa, poverty is something they are born into, with little opportunity to escape. They have seen themselves forever living in the family of poverty. The poverty rotates in a family when there is low capacity; and its basic needs exceed its available means of satisfying them (Chinese Embassy in South Africa, 2002). Therefore, the low capacity causes a multiplier effect, as McConnell notes:

Poverty breeds poverty. A poor individual or family has a high possibility of staying poor. Low incomes carry with them high risks of illness... poor parents can not give their children the opportunities for better health... Thus the cruel legacy of poverty is passed from parents to children (1961: 671).

Where the large majority of the population is poor, and the economy is stagnant, individual characteristics of poor people are less important than the overall context in determining the overall incidence of poverty. Because the individual becomes a mere segment of the entire context of the poor people, and as Africa's economies stagnated while the population grew rapidly, the percentage of people living in poverty grew. This trend persisted into the 1990s, despite the stirrings of economic amelioration towards the end of the decade that helped in boosting growth in some other regions with large populations, such as in Asia (CFA, 2005: 102).

An examination of the poverty standard line initiated by some organisations, together with some practical examples help further to explain why the absolute definition of poverty (*poverty qua poverty*) is chosen for this paper. Note that reasonable reference will be made to Awake Magazine; this is because this paper concentrates more on the practical aspect of poverty, than theoretical analysis. Therefore, it is my view that the kind of survey carried out by Awake, provides the vital empirical report necessary or relevant for the purpose of analysing *poverty qua poverty*; however this will be supported by academic literature.

The first practical examples to be used will be the shelter (housing) problem of poverty. *Awake* (22 September, 2005) reported that 'the number of people living in slums world wide is estimated to be more than a billion' (and this is mainly in Africa and Asia). For example, there are Nigerian cities (such as Ajegunle and Omoroko) where more than 80

percent of the population live in slums and squatter settlements. Brazilian experts in urbanisation fear that the ever growing 'favelas', or slums, in that country will soon 'become larger and more populous than the cities in which they were first established' (ibid, 4). 'If no serious action is taken', said UN Secretary – General Kofi Annan in 2003, as *Awake* reports 'the number of slum dwellers world wide is projected to rise over the next 30 years to about 2 billion' (ibid).

*Awake* observes that cold statistics like this, however, do not even begin to communicate the devastating personal burden that substandard living conditions exact on the world's poor. According to the United Nations Habitat Agenda, 2002 cited in *Awake*, 'more than half of the people in developing countries lack basic sanitation; a third do not have access to clean water, a quarter lack adequate housing, and a fifth do not have access to modern health services. Most people in developed lands would not even let their pets live in conditions like that' (ibid).

Again, *Awake* presents a striking illustration:

On the outskirts of a large African city, 36 year old Josephine lives with her three boys, ranging from 6 to 11 years of age. To make a living, she collects empty plastic containers, which she sells to a nearby recycling plant. This backbreaking labour earns her less than two dollars a day. In that city, this is hardly enough to feed her family or pay for their schooling. At the end of the day, she returns to what she is forced to call 'home'. Its walls are made of baked mud bricks and clay held together by twigs. Loose, rusty iron sheets, along with tin and plastic, serve as roof. Pieces of rock, wood, and metal plates are stacked on top to keep the roof in place during strong winds. Her 'door' and 'window' are torn gunnysacks, which offer no real resistant to bad weather – let alone would be intruders. Even this modest home, though, does not truly belong to her. Josephine and her children live in constant fear of eviction. The land on which their inadequate home stands is to be used for the expansion of a nearby road. Sad to say, similar situations exist in many lands through out the world (ibid: 5).

This is particularly the case in Africa ( For example, around 72% of the total urban population of Africa live in slums, nearly all the urban populations in Chad and Ethiopia live in slums. Cities like Nairobi where almost a million people live in Kibera and places like Ajegunle Lagos, the largest contiguous area of slum settlement are socially unsustainable and inhabitable (RCA, op cit: 50). Awolowo (1981: 76) argues that among the inhuman socio-economic paraphernalia and exigencies of the poor were the fact that they had structures made for shelter that are unsuitable for modern poultry or pigs.

Consider also the lively comparative illustration below between Mary who lives in a developed country, United States and Dede who lives in an undeveloped region, Africa ( as presented by the United Aid West Africa), in order to appreciate *poverty qua poverty*.

Mary, who lives in the United States, begins her day with a shower, brushes her teeth with the water running, flushes the toilet, and then washes her hands. Even before sitting down to breakfast, she may use enough water to fill the average bathtub. By the end of the day, Mary, like many others who live in the States, has used over 350 litres of water, enough to fill a bathtub two and a half times. For her, a clean, plentiful water supply is no farther away than the nearest tap. It is always available; she takes it for granted. For Dede, who lives in West Africa, it's another story. She gets up long before dawn, dresses, balances a large basin on her head, and walks eight kilometres to the nearest river. There she baths, fills the basin with water, and then returns home. This daily routine takes about four hours. For the next hour, she filters the water to remove parasites and then divides it into three containers – one for drinking, one for household use, and another for her evening bath. Any washing of cloth must be done at the river. 'Water hunger is killing us here' Dede says - 'having spent almost half of the morning fetching water, how much of the day is left for farming or other activities? (United Aid for Africa, 1996 in *Awake*, August 22, 1997:4).

Dede's situation is hardly unique. In other words, it is a common predicament of *poverty qua poverty* in many developing countries. In support of this, as argued, evidence shows that 200 million Africans have no access to proper health care, and proper hygiene. Another 47% are without access to safe water. In some parts of Africa the power supply is constantly interrupted or almost non-existent. This is *poverty qua poverty* (Marke, 2007).

In African countries devising a 'primary poverty band' (e.g. \$1-\$3) based on a standard of minimum needs for food, clothing, shelter, health and schooling rather than a poverty line would serve better (primary poverty band is a wide income/expenditure margin), a poverty line is generally defined as a minimum level of income or expenditure below which an individual or household is designated as 'poor'. This is because most of the families have incomes below the various poverty line levels. This is particularly important when it is appreciated the difficulty in defining an 'adequate' minimum when the standard of living itself changes over time. Thus, the very determination of what is required for rational and reasonable human subsistence for each country or area within a country is to a large degree a matter of judgement and subjectivity.

When it is appreciated that reliable statistics on poverty are missing in many African Nations the futility of providing a rigid poverty line becomes even more convincing. Let me take Nigeria and South Africa, the two most strategic

countries in Sub-Sahara Africa and the areas that I will go on to expand as case studies, as illustrations, in the consideration of the Organisations' poverty line study (these countries are indeed strategic in Africa, for example, they account for more than half of Africa's GDP in 2004, The World Bank, 2006).

The International Development Association and International Monetary Fund in liaison with National Economic Empowerment Development Strategy (NEEDS) in Nigeria provide us with below statistics:

Poverty diagnosis in NEEDS is constrained by weak statistics on poverty, particularly on income poverty. Surveys in 1980 and 1992 showed an increase in percentage of Nigerians living below the relative poverty line (defined as expenditure of less than 2/3 of the average per capita household expenditures), from 28 percent to 43 percent. A 1996 survey suggested a further increase in this level to 67 percent, but this is likely to be an overestimation in the light of the trend in GDP per capita over the same period.... The available data on non-income indicators are weak as well, but they also suggest a high incidence of non-income poverty, especially in the rural areas. Life expectancy is a mere 54 years, and infant mortality (100 per 1000 live births) and maternal mortality (704 per 100,000 live births) are among the highest in the world. Only 64 percent of school age boys and 58 percent of girls attend primary school. These outcomes vary widely by income and by geographic location (IDA and IMF, 2005).

In South Africa, it was noted that, despite the same considerable controversy over what constitutes an acceptable 'minimum' living level, the Household Subsistence Level Survey (HSL) is one of the frequently cited surveys used by social science researchers to quantify the prevalence of consumption poverty in South Africa. For example, in 2000, the HSL varies substantially over the different urban centres, from a low of R1274.11 per month for a family of five (two adults, three children) in Pietermaritzburg to a high of R1456.16 per month for a family of five residing in Germiston.

We can see the inconsistency in the above statistical reports, and this is virtually the case in most African countries (though there could be changes from year to year).

Even the World Bank poverty line of US \$1 a day, though the internationally accepted poverty line for developing countries is inadequate to meet the notion of absolute poverty giving that standards of living change overtime. This World Bank's poverty line stipulation, even if it is met by the world's poor countries, will not solve the problem of *poverty qua poverty*. For example, the conversion rate (for \$1) in Nigeria is around N130 and can only afford one average good meal in a day and is therefore quite insufficient for overcoming absolute poverty.

For low-income groups, particularly in developing countries, food expenditure constitutes a large portion of total household expenditure. This just shows the need to focus on absolute poverty and that different people need to eat different quantities. See Table 1 at the bottom of the paper.

The Table 1 lists the specified quantities of selected food items that are deemed necessary to meet the nutrient requirements for different age and gender groups (the monthly food ration approach used by the HSL is derived from the nutritional requirements outlined by the Department of National Health and Population Development in 1993 that were originally conceived by the Department of National Research Council in the USA, and adapted by the DNH to account for South African dietary norms; see Economic Policy Research Institute, 2004).

Therefore, in the African context, instead of debating over a poverty line, there is a 'band' over which definite poverty shades into economic sufficiency. For specific programmes, a basic nutritionally adequate diet or calorie intake must be established. Therefore, the 'band' margin will cover the establishment of specificity for reasonable changes overtime. What I am saying in effect is that even if an income poverty line were to be used, this should be adjusted every year, in order to meet cost of living changes overtime.

## 5. Conclusion

Therefore, based on the above considerations, argument and analysis, this paper conceptualise poverty in the context of Sub-Saharan Africa as: *food intake, housing, clothing, health, plus low real per capita income and poor income distribution, unemployment and absences of schooling beyond primary school level*. This agrees with Sachs extreme definition of poverty in Malaysia in 2007 as argued in the course of this paper. The various African governments should endeavour to eliminate poverty at this level – *poverty qua poverty*, to enable the continent face the contemporary wave of development in the globalising world.

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Table 1. Minimum monthly ration scale for low income groups in South Africa:

FOOD ITEM	Male	Female	Child	Child	Child	Female	Female	Male	Male
Quantities=grams or ml	19+	19+	1-3	4-6	7-10	11-14	15-18	11-14	15-18
Skimmed milk powder	1200	1200	1200	1200	1200	1200	1200	1200	1200
Meat (red and chicken)	795	795	245	398	577	795	795	795	795
Fish	397	397	123	195	289	397	397	397	397
Eggs (1eggs=50g)	650	650	650	650	650	650	650	650	650
Fresh vegetables	9000	9000	3600	5550	7650	9000	9000	9000	9000
Fresh fruit	1083	1083	823	823	823	1083	1083	1083	1083
Margarine	600	450	300	450	450	450	450	600	600
Cooking oil (ml)	606	606	260	433	606	606	606	606	606
Brown bread (800g)	8400	4200	1650	2100	3150	4200	4200	5250	8400
Maize meal, Samp (12.5:2.5kg)	7200	5400	3600	5400	5400	5400	5400	5400	7200
Sugar and Jam (2500:900g)	2100	1200	900	1050	1200	1200	1200	1350	2100
Peanut Butter	433	433	260	260	260	433	433	433	433
Legumes (Beans & Peas)	390	390	65	130	139	390	390	390	390
Coffee and Tea	217	217	-	-	139	217	217	217	217
Salt	130	130	65	65	139	130	130	130	130
Spices and condiments (e.g. pepper, curry, etc)	44	44	22	22	44	44	44	44	44
Fluids (e.g. Vinegar)	87	87	44	44	87	87	87	87	87

Source: Potgieter (2000).

The Table 1 lists the specified quantities of selected food items that are deemed necessary to meet the nutrient requirements for different age and gender groups.