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The Many Faces of Poverty in Sub-Saharan Africa

By highlighting the multiple faces of poverty in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA), this report reveals the complex nature of the challenge of alleviating poverty. Poverty can be seen in many forms and results from a wide range of factors—some structural, some conjunctural. Effective poverty alleviation measures, therefore, must respond to the needs of each situation. The measures appropriate to raise living standards for people living in the Sahelian belt, for instance, may vary considerably from those appropriate to respond to the needs of the population groups living in southern Africa. The Many Faces of Poverty offers an overview of the poor in SSA.

This is the second report written out of an ongoing work program which aims to bring together and synthesize data from household surveys and other sources to capture the different dimensions of poverty in Africa. These activities have been financed through trust funds and country assistance programs and include both formal statistical surveys as well as qualitative and participatory poverty assessments. The first report was presented in Oslo in October 1993 at the inaugural meeting of the Poverty and Social Policy Working Group of the Special Program of Assistance (SPA) entitled Status Report on Poverty in Sub-Saharan Africa. At that meeting, it was decided that a report will be presented annually on the status of the poor in Africa.

Key findings

Stubborn poverty. People in Sub-Saharan Africa, along with those in South Asia, remain among the poorest in the world. Unlike South Asia, however, which is making progress in reducing poverty, Sub-Saharan Africa has a large—-and growing—proportion of the population living in poverty. Between 1985 and 1992, the number rose by almost 1.5 percent, such that there may now be over 210 million people in Sub-Saharan Africa surviving on less than $1 per person per day.
On average, countries in Sub-Saharan Africa experienced a modest growth in Gross Domestic Product (GDP) per capita through the late 1970s followed by a period of decline to the mid-1980s, with modest improvements thereafter. Between 1988 and 1992, the average real GDP growth was slow, but per capita growth was dampened by high population growth which, for many countries, resulted in negative GDP per capita growth. In terms of per capita consumption, 23 out of 43 countries experienced negative growth during the period 1989-1992 and only five countries had per capita growth rates of above 2 percent a year.

**Importance of sound macroeconomic policy.** Table 1 shows the variability in the incidence of poverty between countries. It groups the countries by level of per capita GDP growth from 1988-92. For the bottom group of countries, on average, over 60 percent of the population was living on the equivalent of less than $1 a day in 1990. This group comprises countries that were, in the late 1980s, non-adjusters or that had deteriorating economic policies. In the high- and middle-level growth groups, an average of 44 percent and 46 percent of the population, respectively, were estimated to be living on less than $1 a day. Comparisons of changes in poverty levels over time (from 1985 to 1990) need to be made with caution because the number of countries for which data are available at two points in time is limited.

![Table 1. Estimated change in the percent of the population living on less than $1 per person per day in selected Sub-Saharan African countries](http://www.worldbank.org/afr/findings/english/find35.htm)
Improved social indicators. A possible association exists between better economic performance, as measured by level of Gross National Product (GNP) per capita and both a reduction in the incidence of poverty and improved social indicators. Among the poorest countries—those with the lowest GNP per capita—65 percent of the population were living in poverty in 1990, compared with 53 percent for the middle group, and 35 percent for the group with the highest GNP per capita growth. The wealthier Sub-Saharan African countries, with GNP per capita in excess of $460, perform better with respect to all key poverty indicators. In the middle income group, with GNP per capita of $288 to $459, a number of social indicators (although not all) are better than the lower income group. For all key social indicators, without exception, the worst performer is always a country from the poorest income group, and the best performer is always one from the wealthier group (see Figure 1).

The lowest life expectancy in a single country in the poorest income group is only 56 percent of the average life expectancy in the northern industrialized countries, and the highest is in a country in the wealthiest group, at 94 percent of the North. The richest group of countries is doing well in all aspects of social service delivery and in the health of its people. Gross primary enrollment rates reach an average of 107 percent in the wealthiest group, with the other two lagging behind at 74 and 61 percent, respectively. Female primary school enrollment rates, which have reached 100 percent in the richer group, fall sharply to 63 percent and 51 percent in the other two groups. Access to health services is better for the richer group at 74 percent of the population, but falling to 46 percent and 49 percent for the middle and poorest groups. Under-5 mortality and malnutrition follow the same trend, with the higher income group performing better.

Overall, most economic indicators stagnated, yet social indicators improved, especially long-term indicators such as life expectancy, child mortality, and adult literacy. Over 6 percent more of SSA's total population had access to safe water as of 1992 than had in 1985. However, the low- and middle-income countries indicated a significant drop in the proportion of the population having access to health services. For the poorest countries, the movement is alarming with 17 percent less of the population having access to health services in 1990 than in 1985.

More and more people. Poverty is exacerbated by the high rate of population growth in many countries. In 1992, Africa's population was 503.5 million—growing annually at about 3 percent. By the year 2025, the population is estimated to reach 1,200 million. Almost every country is showing a broad-based demographic pyramid—a population trend which is large at the base, tapering off rapidly. High fertility and declining child mortality are explanations for this pyramid configuration. The consequences of this demographic configuration are large households and high dependency ratios—fewer adults must provide for more dependents in an environment of slow growth and limited employment opportunities. From the Government's point of view, the already overburdened capacity to render social services is being further stressed. In sum, these two factors are increasingly associated with poverty at the household level—large households with high dependency ratios. The education level of the household head does, however, have a strong influence on household expenditure.

Rural and urban differences. The majority of poor live in the rural areas (see Figure 2). This is
linked to three factors:

- Rural households are larger than urban households;
- Adult migration has caused a greater increase in dependency ratios in rural than urban households; and
- Access to education is easier in urban areas than it is in rural.

Increasing desertification, drought, and/or a fall of international market prices for agricultural goods have forced members of rural households to work harder than their urban counterparts—they have to fetch water from distant sources, take animals to drink at far away streams, and work for others, often at the neglect of their own fields.

Urban poverty is growing rapidly and creating new problems for the poor: the need to rent accommodations, pay higher prices for transportation, and seek employment where opportunities are scarce. In urban areas, the lack of employment opportunities precipitates poverty. In many countries, the labor force is leaving the formal private and public sector and entering the informal labor market, often as unpaid family helpers.

Because of the economic crisis and decreased job opportunities, self employment has become the most promising income-generating activity. However, self employment is associated with unstable and unsafe working conditions, low wages, temporary status, clandestine activities, and the absence of labor legislation coverage. Coping strategies of the traditional culture appear to be breaking down. Family and neighborhood patterns of solidarity no longer prevail. Many unmarried women are forced to make a living for themselves and their children in a hostile environment of crime, political unrest, and the AIDS epidemic.

The report used innovative charts to examine the relationship between social and economic indicators and to capture the many dimensions of poverty. In Figure 1, for example, countries have been put into three groups according to GNP per capita level. Eight key poverty indicators were selected and the average rating for each group was plotted on the eight axes and then connected together. In principle, the larger the area of the polygon linking each of the indicators the better. The picture that emerges confirms a clear association between the wealth of a nation and the level of its key poverty indicators. Wealthier Sub-Saharan African countries perform better across the board: their citizens eat better, live longer, send a greater proportion of their children to school, and more of them are literate. They also have better access to health services and safe water. Figure 2 shows how the radar chart can be used to compare key social indicators for different population groups within a country—in this case, rural and urban populations in Zambia. Urban communities fare far better across all key indicators that their rural compatriots. The figure was replicated for three other countries—Guinea, The Gambia, and Kenya—and, in each case, the story which emerged was the same.
Conclusion

It is estimated that a minimum growth rate of 4.7 percent per annum is needed to achieve a reduction in the number of poor in Africa. Despite the efforts of African governments and the donor community, the continent is far from achieving the necessary levels of growth—although there have been indications of an upturn in recent years. The report consequently signals that support to poverty alleviation efforts must be sustained and intensified. Specifically, the description of how poverty is coped with at the household level suggests that enormous potential can be exploited by providing greater opportunities for a "bottom-up" approach.

The path to poverty reduction in Africa must include the empowerment of communities, households, and individuals which allows them to seek their own solutions and welfare enhancing opportunities. Possibly the greatest potential force is African women. Investment in women's education and promotion of their access to productive resources will promote economic growth, redress the
imbalances produced by uncontrolled population growth, and achieve higher standards of living for the continent as a whole.

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