

Book review

Uprooting poverty: The South African Challenge (Report for the Second Carnegie Inquiry into Poverty and Development in Southern Africa) (1989)
by Francis Wilson & Mamphela Ramphele.

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One of the consequences, albeit unintended, of the publication of the First Carnegie Enquiry into the effects of poverty in the early 1930s, was to generate a political response from the government of the day to alleviate the dire poverty of poor whites in South Africa. Using labour legislation as the thrust of their activities they focussed on entrenching white privilege at the expense of black labour. The consequences of this process are highlighted in Wilson & Ramphele's account of the migrant labour system and its catastrophic effects on the social structures and family life of millions of black South Africans. It is the economic forces entrenched in racial capital that serve as the underlying focus of much of the Second Carnegie Report.

Uprooting Poverty provides the most comprehensive account of the causes and consequences of poverty yet available to readers concerned with South African issues. It details the economic foundations of the process of impoverishment and the political system which maintains it.

The book is divided into three parts: The first deals extensively with the manifestations of poverty, the second with the causes of poverty and the third with suggestions for action against poverty.

In their account of the manifestations of poverty the authors provide us with a comprehensive analysis of its effects in a number of areas of human activity: work, unemployment, health, housing, and education. Drawing the

briefest summary of these data we find that the average wage for a black person employed in the mining industry in 1985 was less than R350 per month, and thus below the minimum living level. Of this monthly wage remittances to their families varied between R15-R38 per month. Given that many in the rural areas depend on these remittances as an important source of income the consequences of low wages in the mining sector become a critical factor in poverty in these areas. Similarly, in the arena of health the statistics on the incidence of tuberculosis, a disease almost entirely associated with poverty, reveal the gross discrepancies between living conditions of the different race groups in South Africa, 81% of all reported notifications being African. In the field of education the statistics are no less favourable to the majority of black people. The oft repeated discrepancy in the amounts spent on black and on white education belies a number of other equally critical findings presented in the report. Less than 1 in 20 African children who begin Standard 1 matriculate out of the school system. This finding is correlated with those on the poor qualifications of black teachers, the huge classes with which they are expected to deal and a lack of morale stemming from the conflict in schools. As the authors point out "there can be few more urgent and immediate political tasks in South Africa than rethinking the role of teachers in an oppressive structure so that they may play their full part ... in the long march to liberation", (p.144).

The wealth of statistical information which supports their analyses is amplified with illustrative case studies and respondents accounts of the effects of impoverishment on their daily lives. As one respondent notes "Poverty is just people not paid enough for what we done". This technique of interspersing the statistical basis for their argument and individuals' responses to the situation brings an immediacy to the book's message. This is further amplified with a series of photographs which poignantly precede each chapter.

One issue which arises consistently in the tables of data presented are the wide fluctuations that occur between neighbouring localities on many of the indices of poverty. For example, discrepancies between unemployment rates in various Durban township and squatter areas are substantial but do not elicit more than passing comment from the authors. While this may be appropriate given the authors intention to paint a broad canvas, these discrepancies also alert the reader to a situation that requires considerably more detailed analysis of the problem in the event of intervention programmes being initiated.

In the second part of the book the authors trace the roots of poverty to essentially two sources - an employment system based on migrant labour and a fundamentally undemocratic political system that creates a sense of powerlessness and stifles individuals at every turn as they make efforts to escape from the trap of impoverishment.

In examining the historical antecedents of the present situation the authors note the exploitation of labour in the earliest days of the Cape up to the pre-Nationalist period together with the development of the early labour movements among black workers and their suppression. In a later section of their book it is the re-emergence of the black labour movement in the 1980s that holds greatest hope for the authors as a vehicle for mobilisation of workers in the fight against poverty. As they note "power lies at the heart of the problem of poverty in southern Africa". Although they are unwilling to explicitly outline how power is to be obtained the authors differentiate between what they call "short-run" and "long-run action plans" which move in that direction. They suggest that the actions of independent organisations such as trade unions, collectives and cooperatives may provide enduring effects on the nature and quality of the future, but only once a fundamental shift in the distribution of political power towards democratisation of society has taken place.

In the short run the authors suggest that one of the most important consequences of these activities is the sense of achievement and power that people experience over the circumstances that affect their daily lives. It is the knowledge that their actions have consequences, that they themselves can control events, that provides the psychological boost to self-esteem and feelings of worth often absent in the very poor. Wilson and Ramphela also make the cogent point, often made before and equally often forgotten, that this sense of power and control over life circumstances cannot simply be handed out by the well-meaning to the impoverished. The conditions must be created which allow people to find ways to help themselves.

It should be noted that one of the roles of the community psychologist has been to facilitate the development of strategies for self-reliance. It is equally notable that a report which deals with fundamental issues of the human condition is characterised by little or no reference to research in this area. Whether the absence of any psychological input stems from deliberate omission or a perceived paucity of relevant psychological research is an issue that is no longer productive to debate. One can only hope that these issues and others of a psychological nature will form a significant part of research programmes which will grow out of the report. A case in point is the recently initiated Birth to Ten Project in Soweto coordinated by the Medical School at the University of the Witwatersrand where long-term follow-up studies of growth, health and psycho-social development of all children born in a particular month are planned.

In the final chapter of *Uprooting Poverty* the authors pose several questions that stem from their preceding analysis. These include the issue of sanctions, the nature of land tenure and redistribution of land, and decisions about the reallocation of resources in some future democratic society. While the authors

attest to the need to confront these questions with rigour and honesty, to avoid the over-simplification of half-truths, they themselves suggest that it is beyond the scope of their report to do so. The final and critical question that the authors pose is the following, "Is it really correct to argue that political democracy is a fundamental prerequisite of the long term struggle against poverty?", (p.355). Their answer is, guardedly, yes. However, they acknowledge that the history of Africa is not one replete with political democracy and the dawning of a new age where poverty is substantially reduced, and in political democracies, where they do exist, poverty is still extant.

What is clear from the analyses presented in *Uprooting Poverty* is that massive poverty exists on our very doorsteps, and while we must participate in long-run attempts to democratise our society, to redistribute wealth more equitably, we also have to deal with the immediate problems of the chronic poor. It is the strategies for this enterprise that should serve to focus the attention of professionals in the social sciences.

REFERENCE

Wilson, F & Ramphela, M (1989) *Uprooting poverty: The South African Challenge (Report for the Second Carnegie Inquiry into Poverty and Development in Southern Africa)* Cape Town: David Philip.

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