

FOREWORD

George Bernard Shaw argued more than 100 years ago (in the preface to his 1907 play *Major Barbara*) that, ‘The greatest of evils and the worst of crimes is poverty’. This certainly goes well beyond noting the fact that poverty is a huge tragedy, which ruins the lives of a great many people across the world. The immense tragedy of poverty is obvious enough: lives are battered, happiness stifled, creativity destroyed, freedoms eradicated by the misfortunes of poverty. But Shaw was not talking, on this occasion, about the hardship of poverty, or the misfortune that goes with it. He was commenting on the causation and consequences of poverty – that it is bred through evil and ends up being a crime. Why so? And how is that evil bred?

The classic view that poverty is just a shortage of income may be well established in our minds, but ultimately we have to see poverty as unfreedoms of various sorts: the lack of freedom to achieve even minimally satisfactory living conditions. Low income can certainly contribute to that, but so can a number of other influences, such as the lack of schools, absence of health facilities, unavailability of medicines, the subjugation of women, hazardous environmental features, and lack of jobs (something that affects more than the earning of incomes). Poverty can be reduced through expanding these facilities, but in order to guarantee that, what is needed is an enhancement of the power of people, especially of the afflicted people, to make sure that the facilities are expanded and the deficiencies removed.

People remain unempowered as a result of a variety of complex processes. The predicament of the poor need not be the result of deliberate cultivation of asymmetry of power by identifiable ‘evil-doers’. But no matter how the deprivations develop, the gross asymmetries

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do not correct themselves. Quiet acceptance – by the victims and by others – of the inability of a great many people to achieve minimally effective capabilities and to have basic substantive freedoms acts as a huge barrier to social change. And so does the absence of public outrage at the terrible helplessness of millions of people. Thus the social evil draws not just on those who positively contribute to keeping people down, but also on all the people who are ready to tolerate the thoroughly unacceptable predicaments of millions of fellow human beings. The nature of this evil does not relate principally, even primarily, to the diagnosis of specific evil-doers. We have to see how the actions and inactions of a great many persons together lead to this social evil, and how a change of our priorities – our policies, our institutions, our individual and joint actions – can help to eliminate the atrocity of poverty.

This book from Oxfam explores many different ways in which poverty is being fought through the empowerment of the people whose deprivations relate ultimately to their helplessness in a badly organised world. Under the lead authorship of Duncan Green, the book discusses a number of different types of initiative across the world that have enhanced and expanded the powers of the powerless and through that have reduced the unfreedoms that characterise the poverty of the deprived. In bringing about these changes, the state obviously can – and does – have an important role to play, and yet the state is not the only responsible agency that can make a difference, nor is it the only instrument for tackling the general evil that society tends to tolerate and accept. If the evil of poverty and the crime associated with it can come through the actions and inactions of a great many persons, the remedy too can come from the co-operative efforts of people at large.

What the book calls ‘active citizenship’ can be a very effective way of seeking and securing solutions to these pervasive problems of powerlessness and unfreedom. The reader is told about various efforts to enhance the power of the unempowered, varying from the pursuit of women’s rights in Morocco to the international campaign to ban landmines around the world. They can all make a huge difference in fighting intolerable and unacceptable deprivations. One case study after another is invoked, presented, and investigated to show how changes can be brought about through deliberate and organised efforts.

This book, which I hope will be widely read, is important for at least three distinct reasons. First, through discussing the ways and means of reducing and removing deprivation, the case studies bring out the role of powerlessness in generating deprivation and the effectiveness of empowerment in overcoming widespread deprivations.

Second, studies of this kind serve as much-needed correctives to the growing tendency to think of poverty removal mainly in terms of economic growth. There has certainly been some success in many countries in the world in reducing the proportion of people with very low incomes through economic growth, a success that is significant enough even though the achievements are often exaggerated. But the attraction – even the intoxication – of this success has also contributed to the mistaken understanding that (1) raising income is the uniquely privileged way – indeed the only secure way – of removing the unfreedoms of poverty (this downplays the role of general enhancement of economic, social, and political opportunities) and (2) high economic growth must necessarily be a sure-fire method of raising the incomes of the poor (this understates the social changes that are needed for expanding the freedom of the deprived to get a reasonable share in market-based aggregate economic growth). It is critically important, as a corrective, to clarify, with actual illustrations, that poverty has many dimensions, and that the removal of deprivation calls for much more than economic growth (important as it is).

Third, the recounting of a number of successful initiatives in removing deprivation through empowerment helps also to confront the pervasive pessimism that has become so common these days concerning the possibility of deliberately bringing about the changes that are needed. An exaggerated belief in the frailty of public efforts – whether of the state or of active citizens – generates a climate of cynicism and provides comfortable grounds for inaction and torpor, even when the widespread deprivations and sufferings are fairly well recognised. The recounting of what is actually being achieved – and how these achievements come about – can be very important as an antidote to inactivity based on exaggerated pessimism.

George Bernard Shaw may have chosen unusual words to characterise poverty as an ‘evil’ and a ‘crime’, but underlying that verbal choice is clearly a call for action, through a more forceful social analysis

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of the nature and causation of poverty that can lead to more determined efforts to eliminate the iniquity of poverty. In telling us what can be achieved by ordinary people through organised action, this book generates hope even as it enhances understanding of what is involved in the removal of poverty. The world does need hope as well as the know-how, and we have reason to be grateful for what we get from this important study of a rich collection of collaborative social action.

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