

Enquiry: Poverty and Wealth

Do the perspectives below raise any question that you have not thought about before? What are the assumptions informing these perspectives? What are the implications of those assumptions?

The connection between the generation of poverty and the generation of wealth is often forgotten. Exploitation – both past and present – is the central root of poverty. The privilege the so-called ‘first world’ enjoys today does not come from a superior mind or culture, but from their capacity to exploit and bully through colonisation, militarisation, unfair trade rules and a good partnership with the elites of ‘Third World’ countries.

Poverty is natural. When babies are born, they have nothing. Nature gives us a mind with which to think and a body with which to labour. If we use both wisely, the result will be wealth. Wealth is what happens when people think and work hard. People take the things they find on earth, things which have no inherent value at all, and turn them into resources which they can use to sustain their lives. People create wealth. In this sense wealth, not poverty, is man-made. The best way for poor nations to become rich is to see how rich nations became rich.*

Poverty and exploitation will always exist because human nature is self-interested. We are natural competitors like the other animals and only the fittest will survive. If people can choose between what they feel is good for themselves, or for their family, and what seems good for other people – or even for everybody, everyone will choose to safeguard their interests. After all, other people would not make a choice that would favour them anyway.*

Like slavery and apartheid, poverty is not natural. It is man-made and it can be overcome and eradicated by the actions of human beings. And overcoming poverty is not a gesture of charity. It is an act of justice. It is the protection of a fundamental human right, the right to dignity and a decent life. While poverty persists, there is no true freedom.*

They say we are poor because we have little money and no development. Well, I visited their land and saw their roads and houses and computers and airplanes and their way to educate their children, but I did not see how these things made them closer to one another. I saw a lot of waste and disrespect for the forests and rivers, and for the generations to come. I saw that even those who have a lot can be depressed and without hope. They only seem to be happy when they are drinking, or eating or buying. They live to compete. They send their elders away and teach their children that they will only be useful if they can make money when they grow up. Some are destroying themselves and others, for their lack of hope, of love and of guidance. They are very poor people. Our problems are nothing in comparison to theirs.

To be honest, I know we have more than our fair share and that this is kept at the expense of your people. But this is the economic game and, although we are ahead in the game, we cannot change the rules without putting our own advantage at risk – which would create lots of problems back home. I am sorry, but the only thing we can do is alleviate your problem, but we cannot solve it as it would jeopardise our privilege.

*the authors of these perspectives have been strategically omitted, but if you google the text you will be able to find them.

Informed Thinking

What informed your current perspective on this topic? What shapes the mainstream perspectives available to the public? Where can you find out about different perspectives? How do you make your decisions about what you think about it?

Reflective Questions

Take three minutes in silence to reflect about the following:

1. Do you feel you have enough in life? What are your aspirations? Do you feel you hold any kind of responsibility towards other people outside your family or towards future generations?
2. Do you think poverty, hunger, war and disease in other contexts have anything to do with your life and the choices you make, or are these things unrelated?
3. What changes do you think other people need to make (in your country and in other countries) to make the world fairer for all? What would you be prepared to change in your life, if this change was necessary for this to happen?
4. How was your perspective constructed? How often has it changed in recent years?
5. To what extent are you open to share your perspective with others and to have your assumptions questioned/challenged?

Open Space Questions

Read through the list of questions below. Are there any other burning questions you would like to add to this list? Select two 'priority' questions for discussion in your group.

1. How do you define poverty and wealth?
2. Is the problem of inequality in the world (as concentration of wealth and resources) getting better or worse? How can this be measured?
3. Is there poverty in the 'First World'? If so, how is it different from poverty in the 'Third World'?
4. How are people who are rich and who are poor interconnected? What are the consequences of poverty for rich people? What are the consequences of a high concentration of wealth in a few hands for poor people?

5. How has wealth been generated and maintained in the world and in your country? How has poverty been generated and maintained in the world, and in your country?
6. Has economic growth in First World countries eradicated poverty 'at home'? Can economic growth in 'Third World' countries eradicate poverty? Can free trade eradicate poverty?
7. If a capitalist society depends on people competing with one another for consumption and accumulation of material goods (like land, houses, cars, clothes) and symbolic goods (like education, 'culture', designer labels), is there a possibility that we will have a situation where the common good is achieved and everyone wins (there are no 'losers')? Does the existence of 'winners' depend on the existence of 'losers'? What are the implications of this kind of consumption?
8. Does the excitement of being rich depend on the differentiation in relation to those who are 'poorer'? Does the power of developed countries depend on the disempowerment of developing countries?

Responsible Choices

How does this topic relate to your context of work? To what extent does asking these questions affect your decisions?

You need to plan a workshop on the MAKE POVERTY HISTORY campaign. You want to use the campaign as a starting point to explore issues related to poverty and (global) North-South relations, but you also want pupils to engage critically with the campaign itself (i.e. examining its message and understanding limitations and implications of what is proposed) in order to develop independent thinking and to enable informed decision making. What would the outline of your workshop look like?

Debriefing

Think about your learning process today. What have you learned about yourself? What have you learned about others? What have you learned about knowledge and about learning? Do you feel you and other participants could express themselves in an open and safe space? What could be done to improve the learning process of the group and the relationships within the space?