
Why Assist People Living in Poverty? The ethics of poverty reduction

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WHY ASSIST PEOPLE LIVING IN POVERTY? THE ETHICS OF POVERTY REDUCTION

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Abstract: The paper provides an examination of the relevance of ethics to poverty reduction. Ethics examines the nature and scope of institutions as the deepest level of analysis. The ethics of poverty is understood as the principles and processes of justification employed to justify assisting people in poverty. The paper argues that ethical perspectives are relevant to understanding poverty and the priority given to poverty reduction in society. It further argues that ethical perspectives inform the design and scope of anti-poverty programmes. Drawing on the recent expansion of social assistance in Brazil, South Africa and Ghana, the paper shows that ethical perspectives are relevant to our understanding of the evolution of anti-poverty policy.

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1. INTRODUCTION

International discussion and debate on poverty and poverty reduction in low- and middle-income countries has been deservedly dominated by a focus on poverty trends and by concerns over the relative effectiveness of anti-poverty policies.¹ Less attention has been given to understanding, at the domestic level, the ways in which poverty is shaped in the public discourse and the priority attached to poverty reduction. Our paper aims to throw light on this issue by linking poverty and poverty reduction to relevant 'shared values that define social arrangements'. We start from the proposition that public perceptions of poverty and of the priority attached to poverty reduction are influenced as much by technical and policy perspectives as by shared values which define the social arrangements and institutions. The extent to which shared values define social arrangements concerning poverty likely emerges from domestic political processes of learning and justification.²

The paper argues that linking the shared values that define the social arrangements and institutions, which we refer to as 'ethical perspectives', to the emerging welfare institutions addressing poverty in developing countries provides a window into these processes of justification at a more fundamental level.

Ethics examines the nature and scope of just institutions and social arrangements at the deepest level of analysis. By ethics of poverty we refer to the most basic arguments and processes used to justify how and why we assist people living in poverty. Given the extent to which poverty reflects injustice, we argue it is appropriate to consider poverty in the context of ethics. We go further in arguing that ethical perspectives not only provide insights into public understanding of poverty and of the priority attached to achieving poverty reduction, but it also throws light on the scope and design of the institutions and policies charged with addressing poverty. Several ethical perspectives exist and are capable of illuminating these issues. Relevant ethical perspectives include egalitarian, utilitarian, priority, sufficiency and humanitarian perspectives.³ In our view, these perspectives have implications for defining the concept, scope and significance of poverty and poverty reduction.

The persistence of poverty is inconsistent with just institutions, yet ethical perspectives on the shape of just institutions are relevant to the study of poverty and to poverty reduction institutions, but the emergence and discussion of these perspectives has rarely focused directly on poverty.

¹ For example, debate on the appropriateness of the dollar-a-day measure of global extreme poverty, and on the relative contribution of economic growth and anti-poverty transfer programmes to its decline, featured prominently in the lead up to the Sustainable Development Goals.

² A discussion of the nature and quality of political processes of justification is beyond the scope of this paper.

³ Literature on the ethics of poverty and poverty reduction is scarce. We provide some suggestions for readers wishing to read further:

- A recent review of the ethics of poverty and poverty reduction can be found in Chapter 2 of Barrientos (2013);
- On poverty as defined by needs, see Waldron (1986). On poverty as defined by respect, see Moon (1988);
- Assisting people in poverty can be justified in terms of egalitarian perspectives. A focus on people in poverty and on poverty reduction helps promote equality (Temkin, 2003);
- The 'priority view' discusses why benefits to the worst off have higher ethical value. See Parfit (1997);
- Some argue that concerns with the worst off should be qualified. What matters is that people have enough (Frankfurt, 1987);
- Regarding our duty to assist the distant poor, a range of perspectives is presented in Chatterjee (2004);
- On the role of ethics in social protection policies in developing countries see the articles in Ulriksen and Plagerson (2016b).

There is a large and important literature on poverty reduction as policy.⁴ The increase in poverty reduction programmes (in particular through social protection) in the last 15 years has seen much focus on practical issues, such as targeting the right beneficiary, how to finance poverty reduction, the most effective implementation methods and drawing up legislation. While there is a substantive literature on the extent to which shared values define welfare institutions in developed countries,⁵ this literature is scarce in developing countries (Ulriksen & Plagerson, 2016a). Our paper aims to address this gap by contributing to the understanding of how ethical perspectives influence the shape of poverty reduction policies in lower- and middle-income countries.

Our objective is not to provide a comprehensive overview of ethical theories, but rather we focus on describing the relevant link between ethics and poverty reduction. In the main body of the paper, we analyse how ethical perspectives help understand key design features of anti-poverty programmes, and provide three case studies (Brazil, South Africa and Ghana) exploring the role of ethical perspectives in the development of poverty reduction policy and programming in these countries.

The paper is divided into four main sections.

The next section examines the relevance of ethical perspectives to the understanding of poverty, its causes and its remedies.

The section that follows explores the linkages between ethical perspectives and anti-poverty programmes, focusing on types of interventions and on key features of their design. It pays particular attention to three design features discussed extensively in the literature: targeting, conditions and graduation. The discussion notes the way in which ethical perspectives can be associated with specific features of programme design, and in the process helps to understand these features.

The third section tackles the issue of whether ethical perspectives are relevant to the evolution and dynamics of poverty reduction. Using the examples of Brazil and South Africa, in which landmark political change led to an expansion and reform of anti-poverty programmes, the discussion provides insights into the way in which ethical perspectives on poverty underlie public understanding of poverty and of the remedies chosen to tackle it.

Following the experiences in South Africa and Brazil, the fourth section explores these issues in the context of Ghana. The discussion begins with a review of the basic ethical perspective, values, and objectives embedded in the country's 1992 Constitution. It then considers the role of poverty reduction strategies in extending and complementing the ethical principles implicit in the Constitution. It ends with an assessment of the strength of the current consensus on poverty and poverty reduction.

⁴ See inter alia Ravallion (2016) and Houghton and Khandker (2009).

⁵ See the classic study by Esping-Andersen (1990) and van Kersbergen and Manow (2009).

2. WHY DO ETHICS MATTER IN POVERTY DEBATES?

This section provides a brief introduction into the role of ethics in providing a deeper justification for assisting people in poverty.⁶

This paper argues that ethical perspectives help us to understand poverty and the priority assigned to poverty reduction. In our view, this is because ethical perspectives describe and help us assess just institutions. We argue that notions of justice underlie societies' rationalization for focusing on poverty and poverty reduction. However, the relationship between notions of justice on the one hand and poverty reduction on the other, is mediated by political and epistemic processes. It might be helpful to consider the set of relationships as follows:

Ethical perspectives -> Social norms -> Political processes -> Policy -> Poverty reduction.

Working backwards, in the context of poverty reduction it is uncontroversial to argue that poverty reduction depends in part on specific policies, themselves emerging from policymaking. Few would reject the view that particular policies are directly influenced by political processes and institutions. In turn, shared social norms input into political processes and policymaking. In our paper, we are simply adding the proposition that ethical perspectives underlie social norms and political processes. While social norms shape public understanding of the root causes of poverty and of potential remedies to reduce poverty, social norms are themselves underpinned by deeper ethical perspectives which refer to the social arrangements and institutions in a just society taking account of the interests of persons from an impartial standpoint.⁷ Ethical perspectives are therefore deeper and more general than social norms. By extension, an understanding of ethical perspectives should help us better understand poverty reduction policies.

It is important not to see the arrows in the relationships above as uniquely deterministic. In fact social norms might well engage several ethical perspectives at once (this is the case in the notion of ideology), and political processes usually engage ethical perspectives in competition with each other. And the direction of the arrows might be reversed where policies or political processes inform social norms. It is beyond the scope of the paper to provide a comprehensive analysis of these sets of relationships.

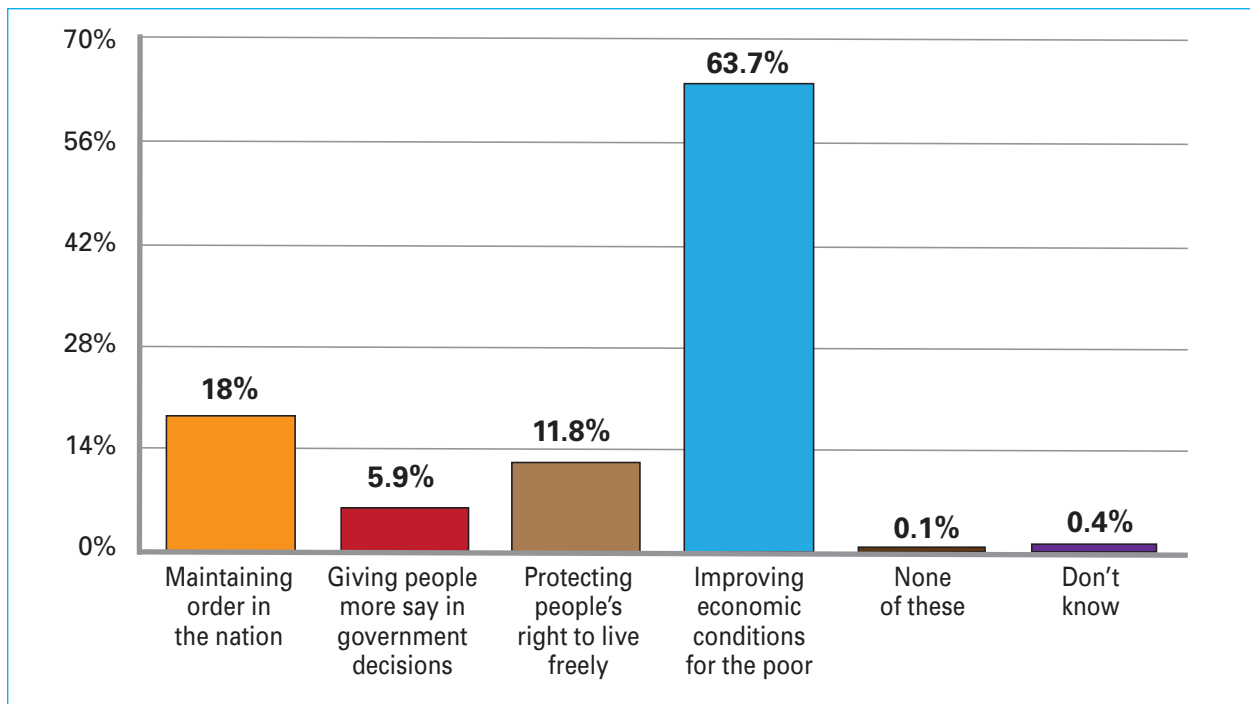
2.1 The relevance of ethics in domestic anti-poverty policy

An example might help to clarify these sets of relationships and the distinction between ethical perspectives and social norms.

Figure 1 reports on respondents' views on national development priorities in Ghana from Afrobarometer Round 4 2008/9. A majority of respondents prioritize poverty reduction favouring the economic inclusion of people in poverty as the main priority (63.7 per cent), well ahead of other issues. We interpret these findings to confirm that poverty eradication is a widely shared social norm among Ghanaians.

⁶ Poverty describes the situation of people facing large deficits in well-being preventing their full participation in society.

⁷ Ethics is here distinguished from morality pertaining to the rules of conduct.

Figure 1 – Government priorities ranked by Afrobarometer respondents

Source: Afrobarometer Round 4, 2008/2009

The priority attached to poverty reduction (social norm) can be justified on the basis of multiple ethical perspectives, though.

Such priority may be rooted in an ethical perspective based on the principle that social arrangements and institutions should maximise happiness in society, to achieve 'the greatest happiness for the greatest numbers', a view introduced by Bentham (1879).

Alternative ethical perspectives may justify the priority attached to poverty reduction from a principle of fairness, therefore aimed at redistributing resources to groups in poverty to bring about greater equality across people (e.g. Frankfurt (1987); Temkin (2003)). From this perspective, poverty reduction is part of a set of broader policies addressing inequality in society.

Other ethical perspectives may justify poverty reduction on the moral principle that every individual must be helped in order to survive up to a certain threshold (e.g. Frankfurt (1987)). Therefore, in this case, the moral duty of poverty alleviation only makes sense up to the threshold. The interests of everyone above the threshold are irrelevant for the purposes of anti-poverty policy.

The priority attached to poverty reduction can be justified by the view that benefits to the worse off have the greatest value, and therefore assistance should be directed to those that are worse off in society (Arneson, 2002; Crisp, 2003). Finally, a strong basis for assisting vulnerable groups might be found in ethical perspectives on recognition (Fraser, 1995). A justification for assistance can be based on the view that the disadvantage suffered by these groups arises from economic and political institutions systematically denying their value and contribution.

The example and discussion above focuses on distinguishing how different ethical perspectives can justify the priority given to poverty and poverty reduction in a country. Still, these views are not necessarily mutually exclusive, and they are not an exhaustive list of views that may be applicable. They share overlapping arguments and concerns that can be combined in specific contexts.

In conclusion, this section makes two main points. First, social norms influencing poverty debates are grounded in deeper ethical perspectives. Second, alternative ethical perspectives provide important insights into the justifications provided for the scope and priority given to anti-poverty policy. The discussion in this section demonstrates the relevance of ethical perspectives for poverty and poverty policy debates at the domestic level.

3. ETHICAL PERSPECTIVES AND ANTI-POVERTY PROGRAMME DESIGN

The previous section examines the relevance of ethics to our understanding and priority attached to poverty and poverty reduction. This section argues that prevalent ethical perspectives also influence the design and implementation features of policies addressing poverty at the programmatic level. The discussion below examines the relevance of alternative ethical perspectives to understanding programme type and programme design features, including targeting, conditions and graduation.

3.1 Ethics and types of anti-poverty programmes

Anti-poverty programmes in low- and middle-income countries (i.e. social assistance initiatives such as cash transfers or public work schemes) show wide diversity in design. We start from the three main types of social assistance remedies (Barrientos, 2013): pure income transfers, income transfers combined with asset accumulations and integrated poverty reduction programmes.⁸

Pure income transfers describe interventions that support households mainly through cash supplements. Such transfers often select beneficiaries on population groups typically associated with a high risk of poverty or vulnerability, orphaned children, elderly, and people with disabilities, for example. The unconditional component of Ghana's Livelihood Empowerment Against Poverty (LEAP), targeting people with disabilities and the elderly, falls under this type of programme.

The LEAP programme also targets households in poverty with vulnerable and orphan children and more recently, pregnant women and households with infants. Participation in the programme is linked to conditions building human assets, education and health. This component of LEAP falls under the second type, income transfers combined with asset accumulation. Other programmes within this type aim at strengthening individual or communal assets. They include permanent public works and guaranteed employment programmes, such as Ethiopia's Productive Safety Net Programme (PSNP) and India's National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (NREGA).

A third type of anti-poverty programme includes integrated poverty reduction programmes. Such programmes combine income transfers, asset transfers, and access to services. Programmes of this type address social exclusion as the main factor in poverty incidence. An example of this type of programme is Chile Solidario, which combines support through social workers, cash transfers and linkages to relevant public programmes.

The selection of programme type is a reflection of policy path dependence, technical considerations and particular government objectives. We argue that it is influenced by ethical considerations as well.⁹

The first type, pure income transfer programmes, associates poverty with income or consumption deficiencies. These programmes are designed to support households in poverty to reach a desired

⁸ Barrientos (2013, pp. 106 - 109) describes in detail the strengths and limitations of the typology.

⁹ The National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme in India, for example, drew from employment guarantee schemes at the state level having demonstrated the feasibility and effectiveness of this approach to address rural poverty. The focus on employment and the rights-based feature of the scheme reflected shared social norms and deeper ethical perspectives.

threshold income or consumption. Alternative ethical perspectives argue just institutions must ensure human flourishing. Egalitarians would make a case that just institutions ensure all citizens access to basic resources on an equal basis (Temkin, 2003). The sufficiency view argues that what is important is not that citizens have equal resources, but that they should have enough resources to secure minimum living standards (Frankfurt (1987)). The priority view makes a case that benefits to the worst off have higher ethical value than benefits to the better off (Parfit, 1997). This is consistent with the view that assistance should be directed to those who are worse off in society.

In programmes where a vulnerable group focus is dominant, the influence of ethical perspectives is more complex. To the extent that population categories – people with disabilities, elderly, orphaned children – are closely identified with acute levels of poverty and disability, ethical perspectives which justify that assistance should be directed to those that are worse off in society are dominant.

Other ethical perspectives, rooted on a fairness principle and aimed at redistributing resources to groups in poverty in order to bring about greater equality across people, could also justify assisting vulnerable groups. Alternatively, a stronger basis for assisting these groups might be found in ethical perspectives on recognition (Fraser, 1995). This view highlights the perception that vulnerable groups are denied their value and contribution to society through unjust economic and political institutions. However, recognition policies are distinct in nature and scope from anti-poverty policies.

The second type of programme reflects a multidimensional view of poverty and emphasises asset accumulation. These programmes assume that in the absence of a sufficient level of productive assets, raising consumption will not address poverty sustainably. Programmes of this type facilitate a shift in the balance of consumption and investment within participant households through an injection of resources and signal that investment in children is important. They combine views on self-sufficiency and autonomy with expectations on the role of capital accumulation in lifting households out of poverty.

The third type of programme emphasises the social and economic constraints faced by households in poverty. They are seen as the result of unequal distribution of resources and power in society and are rooted in political, social, cultural and economic institutions. Programmes of this type aim not just at the satisfaction of urgent needs, but they also aim at achieving social inclusion. Ethical perspectives which promote fairness, redistribution and greater equality are particularly evident here.

A brief review indicates the relevance of ethical perspective in addition to technical and political concerns in choosing the type of programme. Overlapping ethical perspectives could provide a justification for specific programme types. A more detailed analysis of programme design features could help discriminate among these ethical perspectives. In the remainder of this section we examine ethical perspectives on three much discussed features of anti-poverty programmes: targeting, conditions and graduation.

3.2 Targeting

One of the first issues facing policy makers designing anti-poverty programmes is to identify the intended beneficiaries. A distinction needs to be made between the targeting of the programme,

that is which population group the programme is to be directed at, and the rules and procedures for selecting beneficiaries. In the literature, targeting and beneficiary selection are often collapsed into the former, but the distinction is crucial to understand anti-poverty programmes (Barrientos, 2013). Ethical perspectives have a stronger bearing on the issue of targeting, while beneficiary selection rules are shaped by perceptions of their relative effectiveness.

A simple way to think about targeting is as follows: given an insufficient budget to address poverty, we should assist the poorest in reaching the welfare of the next poorest, and then assist them to reach the welfare of the next poorest, until the budget is exhausted.¹⁰ Such a proposal is underpinned by the view of priority, that helping the poorest first among the poor has the highest ethical value. Alternatively, one could consider a threshold, such as a national poverty line, which households need to meet in order to live with dignity. In this case, a government can target households who are below the threshold in order to lift them up to or above the line. It does not matter how far households are below the threshold, and targeting does not distinguish between households at the bottom-end of society, or those just minimally below the threshold. Furthermore, views that support the greatest happiness for the greatest number of people, would support the idea of targeting those households for which it is least difficult to increase their happiness.

Critics of targeting would argue that differentiating public assistance based on socio-economic status might violate an equal treatment principle, as embedded in human rights, or that they lack sound ethical basis and should be avoided (Standing, 2011). An alternative view argues that equal concern does not necessarily imply equal treatment. An equal concern basis would support targeting population groups whose rights are least realised (Sepúlveda Carmona, 2014).

3.3 Conditions

Conditions in anti-poverty programmes require beneficiaries to comply with a predetermined set of 'rules' in order to remain eligible and continue to receive programme benefits. Note that all anti-poverty programmes have conditions, even those characterized as 'unconditional'. For example, participants need to take action to register with the programme or meet certain requirements to become registered. Our focus is on behavioural conditions attached to anti-poverty programmes. The most commonly used conditions are those that incentivise physical asset creation (usually at the community level) or human capital accumulation in terms of education or health.

White (2000) argues that conditions can be justified by a reciprocity principle: those who share in the social product of a given society have a corresponding obligation to contribute to it. The scope of the principle can be extended to the medium- and longer-term for example by the accumulation of human capital to achieve a high level of productivity during the working life. This is in line with social contract theory, which stipulates a shared responsibility among members of society and their government to maximise well-being (White, 2000).

The use of conditions in an anti-poverty programme may also relate to the principle of 'positive' duty of a government, stating that the government may have a duty to assist the poor by

¹⁰All ethical perspectives have implications for effectiveness and efficiency. In this paper we are not concerned with efficiency arguments per se. Our focus is on ethical arguments alone.

incentivizing human capital investment (Pogge, 2003).¹¹ This line of reasoning is especially relevant where beneficiary households make suboptimal investment decisions in the absence of programme conditions. Although not necessarily an anti-poverty policy, the principle of positive duty is embedded in compulsory education, for example.

From ethical perspectives that justify maximising happiness in society, to achieve ‘the greatest happiness for the greatest numbers’, the expected higher yield of human or physical capital in society may justify the use of programme conditions. Governments may take the view that the overall level of education or health in society is a public good and would generate more happiness for everyone, for example through the reduction of crime or infectious diseases. Individuals may underinvest in education or health because they only take account of personal gain and may fail to take account of the gains to society as a whole. Instating laws, subsidies, or incentives are needed to achieve optimal levels of investment.

Alternatively, it may be desirable to have each member of society attain a certain minimum level (thresholds) of human capital (e.g. completion of primary school), or minimum presence of physical assets in their community (e.g. a road accessible throughout the year). Incentivizing such outcomes through the use of programme conditions can thus lead to the desired result for the society as a whole. Finally, attaching greater social value to helping those who are worse off in society, for example in terms of education or health, could justify the use of conditions by directly addressing their low level of human or physical capital.

Critics of conditions in anti-poverty programmes often deploy egalitarian arguments, highlighting the fact that some conditions are applied only to programme beneficiaries and not to other groups in the population (this does not apply to primary education, for example, which is a legal requirement in most countries). This is particularly the case where conditions limit the freedom of programme participants, for example where complying with behavioural conditions restricts the time available to individuals living in poverty which may be better used in income-generating activities (Sepúlveda Carmona, 2014; Standing, 2011).

3.4 Graduation

Graduation in anti-poverty programmes defines responsibilities for programme agencies at the point where beneficiaries are no longer eligible for participation. It reflects an expectation that programme exit is associated with participants exiting poverty sustainably.

The concept of graduation is rooted in the view that government institutions have a responsibility to support those who are worse off to improve their welfare. The sufficiency view would justify support up to a certain basic welfare level, beyond which society’s responsibility is lifted. Alternatively, prioritarians rationalize graduation as an opportunity to redistribute limited resources to the next group of individuals that comply with the eligibility criteria. The withdrawal of support needs to balance against the likelihood that beneficiaries might fall back into poverty again.

¹¹ Regarding our duty to assist the distant poor, a range of perspectives is presented in Chatterjee (2004).

Eligibility conditions might not work as effectively if employed as exit conditions. Anti-poverty programmes using single events as eligibility conditions such as pregnancy or completion of primary education might not be effective when used as exit or 'graduating' conditions. More importantly, ethical justification for eligibility conditions might not apply in the context of exit conditions. For instance, pregnant women receiving the necessary antenatal care and health care needed for the safe delivery of a healthy child, might fall back into poverty after exiting the programme. Similarly, anti-poverty programmes that are focused on graduating individuals who have reached physical asset-accumulation, ignore the stochastic or covariate shocks that can push individuals or groups of individuals back into poverty.

In conclusion, the discussion in this section demonstrates that ethical perspectives are relevant to understanding and assessing anti-poverty programme type and design. The remaining two sections present case studies on South Africa, Brazil and Ghana to understand these linkages in more detail.

4. ETHICS AND THE EVOLUTION OF ANTI-POVERTY POLICY: BRAZIL AND SOUTH AFRICA

The previous section shows the relevance of ethical perspectives to understanding the orientation and design of anti-poverty programmes. In this section the main focus is to explore whether they are useful to understanding the evolution and dynamics of anti-poverty policies.¹²

Recent developments in South Africa and Brazil provide fertile ground in which to investigate this. In the early 1980s, South Africa and Brazil stood out as two middle-income countries with high and persistent levels of poverty and inequality, entrenched racial disparities, and autocratic political regimes.¹³ This section discusses how landmark political change in the two countries led first to the emergence of new social norms and the underpinning ethical perspectives embedded in their Constitutions, and then to a refocusing of welfare institutions on poverty and inclusion.

In particular, we identify that ethical perspectives rooted in the principles of fairness and equality, as well as on the need to focus on and prioritize the worse off in a society, emerged and were embedded in the Constitutions which, in practice, paved the way for the implementation of inclusive social assistance institutions with a focus on children and human development.

4.1 Landmark political change and social rights

Two decades of military dictatorship came to an end in Brazil in 1985, while in South Africa, the fall of apartheid in 1990 was followed by the rise to power of the African National Congress (ANC) in 1994. The end of a dictatorship and of apartheid, and the democratisation process that followed were powerful catalysts for change.

New constitutions were adopted in 1988 in Brazil and in 1996 in South Africa. The new constitutions represented a renewal of their social contracts, and especially democratisation, citizenship, and social policy. They involved a significant expansion of social and economic rights now associated with enhanced citizenship, and included an explicit recognition of the right to social protection and assistance. In time, a raft of innovative policies, programmes, and agencies emerged to help citizens realise enhanced social rights.¹⁴

¹² Our focus is on anti-poverty programmes and policy, but some of the material in this section is also relevant to change and reform of social protection systems.

¹³ South Africa has a population of 50 million, a gross national income per capita of 10,360 US\$ (PPP) and a life expectancy at birth of 52 years. Brazil has a population of 195 million, gross national income per capita of 11,000 US\$ (PPP) and a life expectancy at birth of 73 years. PPP stands for purchasing power parity, and is a measure of the monetary value of a similar basket of goods in different countries in international USD.

¹⁴ The return to democracy in Brazil in 1985 led to calls for a Constitutional Assembly with wide participation from Brazilian society to propose a new Charter. It began proceedings in February 1987 and the Constitution was approved in October 1988. The preamble to the new Constitution states its main aim as follows: "...to institute a democratic State, destined to guarantee individuals the exercise of social rights, liberty, security, well-being, development, equality and justice as supreme values; in a fraternal and pluralist society founded on social harmony and the absence of prejudice" (IPEA, 2007). The basis for this ambitious aim in the Constitution was recognition of the primacy of inclusion – social, political and economic inclusion – as the basis for just social arrangements. It was also a rejection of the exclusionary and unequal policies associated with the institutions set in place during autocracy. In South Africa, the fall of apartheid led to a new Constitution adopted in 1996. As in Brazil, inclusion and social rights were at the core of the new Constitution. In the assessment of the 2002 Committee of Inquiry into a Comprehensive System of Social Security, the "overarching

The extension of full citizenship, understood as full participation in society, broadly reflected equality concerns but with a focus on the full realisation of social rights among excluded groups. Just institutions involved guaranteeing social, political and economic rights to all, but securing these rights required priority be given to the rights of the groups in the population hitherto disadvantaged. In both countries, the need to address long-standing racial and urban-rural inequalities was paramount for legislators.

The new consensus on inclusion and social citizenship involved a radical break with the past. In fact, prior to Brazil's 1988 Constitution, the social protection system had been constructed along Bismarckian lines with a focus on social insurance stratified for different types of workers. It was dominated by a 'contributory principle' largely reinforcing inequalities in status and contributory capacity. Social assistance was left to charitable institutions. The new Constitution established a right to social protection and assistance making the State responsible for its provision. This was a significant change as it reshaped social protection institutions based on a 'citizenship principle'.¹⁵

In South Africa, social assistance first emerged in 1928 with the introduction of a social pension, initially restricted to whites but later extended to coloureds and Africans with stratified requisites for entitlement and benefit levels. In contrast to Brazil, South Africa did not establish social insurance institutions. The new Constitution firmly established the link between social assistance and citizenship and the State's responsibilities in this area. Article 27 states: "1) Everyone has the right to have access to (a) health care services, including reproductive health care; (b) sufficient food and water; and (c) social security, including, if they are unable to support themselves and their dependents, appropriate social assistance. 2) The state must take reasonable legislative and other measures, within its available resources, to achieve the progressive realization of each of these rights"

4.2 The emergence of social assistance

The focus on citizenship and social rights embedded in the new Constitutions – consistent with ethical perspectives rooted in the principles of fairness and equality as well as the need to focus and prioritize the worse off in a society – have subsequently guided the expansion of social assistance in the two countries.

In both countries there has been a marked expansion in the reach of social assistance with a focus on the poorest.¹⁶ This has involved significant progress towards social assistance institutions that are more inclusive and all-encompassing of households in poverty. In both countries, social

principles of the Constitution are closely related to social security goals: healing the injustices of the past, ensuring social justice, improving the quality of life for all South African citizens (inter alia by alleviating poverty and suffering), and freeing the potential for each citizen" (Committee of Inquiry into a Comprehensive System of Social Security for South Africa, 2002, p. 42).

¹⁵There are precedents in Brazil. Schwarzer and Querino (2002) argue that the introduction of a semi-contributory pension for informal rural workers in the 1970s combined contributory and citizenship elements.

¹⁶Arguably, the prioritarian focus noted above can also be observed in the failure of vocal proposals for a basic income (Britto & Soares, 2010; Seekings & Matisonn, 2003).

assistance now reaches beyond households in extreme poverty and increasingly covers households that are not in poverty but are vulnerable to falling into poverty.¹⁷

Aside from reach, the most significant change was a shift towards large-scale social assistance programmes focused on children. In Brazil, the initial focus of policy activism following the new Constitution was on extending protection to older people and people with disabilities in poverty. In parallel, new municipal-level initiatives emerged and led to the introduction of programmes providing transfers to families with children combined with education and health interventions. These initiatives spread to other municipalities and led to the establishment of the federal programme Bolsa Escola in 2001. Together with other transfer programmes, Bolsa Escola became Bolsa Família in 2003. The focus on child poverty and the links to education and health interventions overturned the Bismarckian approach to social policy.

In South Africa too, the dominant social assistance instrument at the time of the new Constitution was an Old Age Grant. But a pressing issue was provision for families in acute vulnerability. A review of existing grants led to the introduction of the Child Support Grant in 1998 (Lund, 2008). Initially targeted on children up to 7 years of age living in families in poverty, the Child Support Grant was gradually extended to children below age 18 living in poverty.

This crucial change in anti-poverty policy confirms the influence on the emerging institutions of the ethical perspectives embedded in the Constitutions. The expansion of social assistance to children in poverty highlights a new focus on addressing poverty and inequality through strengthening human development.

The discussion in this section explores the relevance of ethical perspectives to understanding the evolution of anti-poverty policy in Brazil and South Africa. The main conclusions point to the significant role of landmark political change in generating an expansion of anti-poverty programmes. In Brazil and South Africa, the driving force behind these changes was the achievement of social inclusion and explicit acknowledgment of social and economic rights. The new Constitutions in Brazil and South Africa emphasised fairness, equality and the inclusion of disadvantaged groups with a primary role for social assistance. In practice, the expansion for social rights has involved the implementation of inclusive social assistance institutions with a focus on children and on human development.

¹⁷ Fiscal restrictions were another important contextual issue in Brazil and South Africa at the time. While political conditions were propitious to the growth of social assistance, economic conditions were not. In the last two decades of the 20th century, economic growth rates in the two countries were disappointing. Annual GDP growth rates in South Africa and Brazil from 1993 to 2008 were similar, at around 3 per cent.

5. ETHICS AND THE EVOLUTION OF ANTI-POVERTY POLICY: GHANA

This section examines the relevance of ethical perspectives to anti-poverty policy and institutions in Ghana. The discussion begins with an assessment of the ethical perspectives informing the 1992 Constitution, especially its statement on fundamental values and objectives. This is followed by a discussion of the principles underpinning recent anti-poverty policy.

5.1 The 1992 Constitution and equality

Until the return to multi-party democracy in 1992, Ghana's post-independence history was characterized by long periods of military rule, marked by gross human rights abuses. In the late 1980s, after nearly one decade of quasi-military rule, strong internal and external pressures on the government led to the promulgation of a liberal constitution in 1992, overwhelmingly approved by a 92 per cent majority through a national referendum. In light of the gross human rights violations that characterized various past military regimes, one key feature of the 1992 Constitution is its strong emphasis on human rights. The Constitution mandates the state to protect and promote "all ... basic human rights and freedoms, including the rights of the disabled, the aged, children and other vulnerable groups in the development process."¹⁸ The state is also required to "secure and protect a social order founded on the ideals and principles of freedom, equality and justice."¹⁹ To what extent do these constitutional provisions and broader social norms in Ghana influence shared perceptions of poverty and of the value of poverty reduction programmes?

The country's approach to social protection has been informed by the provisions of the 1992 Constitution, especially those placing emphasis on equality of opportunities and the protection of vulnerable groups. In particular, the Directive Principles of State Policy²⁰ enshrined in the Constitution explicitly mandate the State to "promote just and reasonable access by all citizens to public facilities and services"²¹, "provide adequate means of livelihood and suitable employment and public assistance to the needy"²², as well as "provide social assistance to the aged such as will enable them to maintain a decent standard of living"²³

Several other provisions in the constitution embed equality and inclusive ethical principles. Under Article 36 (6), the State is not only required to "afford equality of economic opportunity to all citizens"; but must also "take all necessary steps to ensure the full integration of women into the mainstream of economic development of Ghana"²⁴ Article 36 (1) (d) embodies the principle of undertaking "even and balanced development of all regions and every part of each region of Ghana"; and goes on to mandate the State to redress historical imbalances in development between rural and urban areas. The Constitution directs public policies to secure "a just and free society."²⁵

¹⁸ See Article 37 of the Constitution.

¹⁹ See Article 37 of the Constitution.

²⁰ "The Directive Principles of State Policy ... shall guide all citizens, Parliament, the President, the Judiciary, the Council of State, the Cabinet, political parties and other bodies and persons ... in taking and implementing any policy decisions, for the establishment of a just and free society." (Ghana's 1992 Constitution).

²¹ Article 35 (3).

²² Article 36 (1).

²³ Article 36 (7).

²⁴ Article 36 (6).

²⁵ Article 34 (1).

The significance of equality of opportunity in the 1992 constitution is reflected on a universalistic approach to social protection, at least on paper. Most social protection programmes in Ghana aspire to be universal in coverage, consistent with ensuring equal opportunities for all. For example, the capitation grant and free exercise books programmes aim to reach all children attending public schools, while exemptions under the National Health Insurance Scheme (NHIS) are supposed to cover all children under the age of 18, all older persons above 70, and all pregnant women irrespective of socio-economic status. Implementation often reflects this universalistic aspiration. Although the rhetorical commitment of the Ghana School Feeding Programme (GSFP) was to target “the most deprived districts/communities and the poor” (Government of Ghana, 2006, p. 20), the actual implementation arrangements focused clearly on enhancing equality of opportunities across geographic zones. In line with the government’s characterization of the programme as a “national” programme intended to benefit public primary schools in “all 138 districts in Ghana” (Government of Ghana, 2006, p. ii), implementation of the programme started in late 2005 with 10 primary schools drawn from each of the 10 administrative regions (i.e. one school per region). After piloting the programme for about half a year, a first up-scaling was undertaken in June 2006 by extending it to two schools per district, and then subsequently to five schools per district.

5.2 The National Social Protection Strategy focuses on extreme poverty

In 2007, Ghana launched a National Social Protection Strategy (NSPS), later revised and renamed the Ghana National Social Protection Strategy (GNSP) in 2012.²⁶ With the Livelihood Empowerment Against Poverty (LEAP) cash grant scheme as its ‘flagship’ programme, the GNSP envisions “an inclusive equitable society in which ordinary and extremely poor and vulnerable citizens are protected from risks and shocks and are empowered with improved capability, to overcome social, economic and cultural challenges in order to realise their rights and responsibilities and to make meaningful contributions to society” (Republic of Ghana, 2012, p. 20). Two main objectives are set out to help realise this vision: first, to enhance the ability of the extremely poor to meet basic needs through improving access to livelihood opportunities; and second, to reduce extreme poverty and related vulnerability and exclusion at the household level through provision of the LEAP Social Grants Programme (Ministry of Manpower Youth and Employment, 2007, p. 6; Republic of Ghana, 2012, p. xii).

It is not immediately apparent that the focus of the GNSP on the extreme poor is aligned to the equality and inclusive principles emphasis in the Constitution. It has been suggested the GNSP and its predecessor might have been directly influenced by the transnational poverty agenda of the 2000s. However, Grebe (2015) draws attention to the “largely domestic” roots of these two policy frameworks. He traces their adoption to the identification of extreme poverty as a major impediment to the country’s ambition of attaining middle-income status, particularly during the implementation period of the country’s first Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (PRSP): Growth and Poverty Reduction Strategy (GPRS) I 2003–2005. He cited a poverty social impact assessment study undertaken by the National Development Planning Commission (NDPC) as “paving the way

²⁶ In December 2015, a national social protection policy for Ghana was finalized and subsequently launched in June 2016.

towards focusing policy on vulnerability among the poorest" (Grebe, 2015, p. 31) and argues that this explains why the NSPS recognised the need for a flagship programme targeting the poorest. Drawing on interviews with senior policy makers, Grebe acknowledges initial resistance to LEAP by a handful of senior influential policy makers.

The new focus on the poorest might be grounded in multiple ethical perspectives. First it is the recognition that, like all other citizens, the extreme poor in society "have fundamental rights to well-being that should be safeguarded by the state and its allies" (Republic of Ghana, 2012, p. xi). It might be argued that this reasoning draws from the human rights-driven approach espoused by the 1992 Constitution. It can also be grounded in the principles of equality and inclusion and LEAP might be construed as a tool for promoting equality or fairness of opportunities and rights for all citizens, which is instrumental to facilitate social and economic cohesion in ways that help reduce the likelihood of conflict in society.

The influence of the ethical principles embedded in the Constitution is most evident here, with social protection described as an "indispensable part of ... government's responsibility towards its citizens ... as enshrined in the 1992 Fourth Republican Constitution" (Republic of Ghana, 2012, p. 10).

A second justification for focusing on the extreme poor draws from the ethical perspectives that suggest that many of the extremely poor in Ghanaian society have the potential to contribute to national development through pro-poor growth. Supporting such potentially productive people with economic opportunities can thus generate substantial national returns, while their continuous exclusion represents a missed opportunity to the state. As the GNSP states: "With their basic subsistence secured, the extremely poor will regain their confidence and seek to engage in productive activities to support themselves and ultimately contribute to national development" (Republic of Ghana, 2012, p. 48).

This is also evident in the argument that the opportunity cost of not putting measures in place could undermine efforts to promote national development. Thus contrary to those who view cash transfers as wasteful handouts to undeserving poor people, the GNSP describes social protection extension expenditures (including those on cash transfers) as "an investment in long-term economic development" (Republic of Ghana, 2012, p. 48). This line of thinking also helps explain why the flagship LEAP programme of the GNSP has been framed not simply as a form of assistance to the poor, but also as a development strategy aimed at enhancing the capacity of marginalized populations to "contribute to the socio-economic development of the country" (Republic of Ghana, 2012, p. 37).

Beneficiary selection under the flagship LEAP programme also provides clues as to the relevance of other ethical perspectives that highlight the need to focus on the worse off in a society. Specifically, LEAP targets extremely poor households which include one or several elderly persons over the age of 65 who have no means of support, low-income victims of natural or man-made disasters, persons with a severe disability and orphans and vulnerable children (Republic of Ghana, 2012, pp. 37-38). This suggests a focus on the inclusion of disadvantaged groups and the equalisation of opportunity. While conditional cash transfers are targeted at the extreme poor with no alternative means of meeting their subsistence needs, unconditional grants are offered to individuals with no

productive capacity such as the elderly poor, and persons with severe disabilities. It is argued that the case for targeting the former groups for income support is based on grounds of both “cost effectiveness and equity”, stating further that “with a limited public budget... it seems sensible and fair to allocate the stipends to those who need them most” (Republic of Ghana, 2012, p. 37). Priority is thus given to the poorest as a way of maximising impact in the context of limited resources.

5.3 The Ghana Shared Growth and Development Agenda and inclusive growth

Since 2010, Ghana’s main development blueprint has been the Ghana Shared Growth and Development Agenda (GSGDA). The GSGDA is significantly different from most of Ghana’s past development blueprints, not least as its emphasis on redistribution and inclusion appears unprecedented. It underlines the importance of a human rights approach to development, stating that the existing national social protection strategy “will be reviewed to provide a vision of social development for the country and address policy gaps in the areas of ... redistribution, social protection, and social integration” (NDPC, 2010, p. 95). It recommends that specific social protection measures be targeted at the most vulnerable and excluded groups to help improve Ghana’s poverty profile, and makes explicit reference to the need for a National Social Protection Strategy as the framework for reaching out to the extreme poor.

What explains the focus on inclusion and inclusive growth in the GSGDA, and how is this justified? In both the GSGDA I and II, there is an explicit recognition that growth alone is no guarantor for creating the “just society” demanded by the Constitution.²⁷ Instead, and based on the country’s experience during the implementation of the GPRS I and II, it is argued that growth can work, and has often worked, very negatively for some people; in fact it can worsen the conditions of some people. The focus on “inclusive and shared growth” is thus used to call for the development of actions that prioritize these groups and the creation of a just society demanded by the Constitution, while conferring an obligation on government to take steps to help these vulnerable groups. So, inclusive growth has been used to justify the priority given to supporting the poorest. This point is explicitly made in the GSGDA I, which explained its proposed interventions as government’s response to the constitutional injunction that the state pursues policies that would lead to the establishment of a just and free society. A particularly important feature of the GSGDA is its emphasis on the reduction of geographical development disparities, especially the historical north-south inequalities that are noted to have widened during the implementation of the country’s PRSPs.

In conclusion, the equality and fairness principles embedded in the 1992 Fourth Republic Constitution appear to have been particularly influential with regards to social policy. It emphasised equality of opportunity and a universalistic approach to social policy. The focus on extreme poverty represented by the two social protection strategy documents appears at first sight to be underpinned by alternative ethical perspectives, including an emphasis on growth with a focus on and inclusion of the worse off in a society and on the benefits of equality. These might reflect the influence of international policy diffusion accompanying the social protection strategies. The GSGDA reinforces a focus on inclusion and on groups left behind by recent economic growth.

²⁷ GSGDA I covers the years 2010–2013, while GSGDA II covers 2014–2017.

6. CONCLUDING REMARKS

The main objective of this paper is to explore the relevance of ethical perspectives to poverty reduction. Poverty is often associated with, and measured by, the needs experienced by people in poverty, but looking beyond the satisfaction of needs, poverty signals the constraints faced by disadvantaged groups in taking full part in society. Poverty is therefore directly linked to social arrangements and institutions. Poverty reduction in the context of justice is consistent with ensuring effective membership in society. In all societies, attitudes to poverty and poverty reduction are shaped inter alia by social norms. In turn, social norms are grounded on deeper principles and values associated with just social arrangements and institutions, articulated by competing ethical perspectives. Our discussion demonstrates the relevance and significance of ethical perspectives for poverty and poverty reduction.

Our discussion provides key insights into the deeper underpinnings of social norms and public perceptions of poverty by considering the relevance of ethical perspectives to our understanding of anti-poverty policies, anti-poverty programme type and design, and to our understanding of the evolution and dynamics of anti-poverty policy in low- and middle-income countries.

Multiple ethical perspectives were shown to be highly relevant to the scope and design of anti-poverty transfer programmes. In particular they throw light on anti-poverty programme design features heavily contested in the literature. An understanding of the multiple ethical perspectives helps us to consider the deeper underpinnings of policy, beyond the issues of technical efficiency and appropriateness.

A brief review of the expansion of anti-poverty policy in Brazil, South Africa and Ghana underscore the relevance of ethical perspectives to our understanding of the evolution and dynamics of poverty reduction policies. Landmark political change in Brazil and South Africa contributed to a shift in social policy towards groups in poverty, and particularly a new focus of anti-poverty policy on children and on human development. The absence of landmark political change in Ghana makes it harder to identify with precision prevalent ethical perspectives and their influence on policy. Our findings point to a gradual process of change and adaptation of competing priorities, but we were unable to determine the strength and sustainability of a possible emerging consensus around poverty reduction.

The analysis in the paper suffers from several limitations. The field of ethics is vast and our discussion of ethical perspectives relevant to poverty reduction is, out of necessity, superficial. Detailed studies focusing on specific ethical perspectives are required to capture their far-reaching implications. Our intention was to demonstrate the relevance of ethics to programme design and scope, but further work is needed to extract the lessons policy designers can gain from these perspectives. In seeking to make the connection between ethical perspectives and poverty reduction we ignored the political dimensions of justification, the arena in which ethics exercise practical influence. It was well beyond the scope of the paper to tackle this. We hope our paper stimulates further research on these research gaps.

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