Chapter 11

Powerless, Trapped in a Many-Stranded Web

Summary
Poor people often feel powerless, trapped in a web of linked deprivations. Earlier chapters describe nine of the dimensions that anchor the web. A final dimension, personal incapabilities, or lack of information, education, skills and confidence, is explored in this chapter. Poor people frequently describe problems with accessing information about government, market and civic activities, particularly outside their communities. Often this is due to geographic isolation, lack of communication and social exclusion. Though many see education as a means to upward mobility, costs and difficult access often deter or prevent them from sending their children to school. Poor people often lack practical skills that would help them earn a livelihood. Their lack of ability to provide for their families and belong to society leads to low self-confidence and self-worth.

Some escape the many-stranded web of disadvantages. For others, the shocks to which they are vulnerable make them poorer and more powerless. Powerlessness leaves most poor people having to choose between one bad thing or another. In the face of agonizingly constrained choices, poor people are remarkable for their tenacity, resilience and hope. For them, the will is there, but often not the opportunity. The challenge for development professionals, and for policy and practice, is to find ways to weaken the web of powerlessness and to enhance the capabilities of poor women and men so that they can take more control of their lives.
Trapped and Tied

[Poverty is] like being in jail, living under bondage waiting to be free.

—A young woman, Thompson Pen, Jamaica

We are left tied like straw.

—A discussion group, Dibdibe Wajtu, Ethiopia

Many poor people feel they are trapped: kept poor and made poorer by multiple disadvantages. Their experience suggests these disadvantages are more comprehensive and more tightly interwoven than much professional and sectoral analysis recognizes. Several metaphors illustrate the condition of powerlessness, poverty and illbeing. Poor people themselves use the metaphors of a trap, of prison and of bondage.

While each of the individual dimensions of poverty is important, it is even more important to understand that the dimensions form a powerful web. They interlock to create, perpetuate and deepen powerlessness and deprivation. It is this interlocking that makes it difficult for the poor to escape poverty and easy to fall back into poverty after clawing their way out. It is this multifaceted nature of powerlessness that makes it difficult for poor people to organize and makes successful cases of organization even more remarkable.

This chapter consists of two sections. Part I explores the last of the 10 dimensions that comprise the interlocking web: personal incapacities. Part II then explores the nature of the multifaceted web as experienced by poor people. This section first reports on how the many-stranded web keeps poor people powerless through multiple causes of deprivation and multiple impacts on deprivation. It then highlights how the interlocking dimensions of deprivation and powerlessness add to the precariousness of poor people’s climb out of poverty and how series of shocks and stresses throw them right back into poverty. Finally, it highlights how this multidimensionality of deprivation painfully limits poor people’s freedom to choose and act. It constrains their choices. Their powerlessness forces them to select between two agonizing choices, two losing propositions—such as whether to have food or send children to school—further limiting their own and their children’s chances of success in the struggle for a better life.1
Part I. Lack of Capabilities

If they [children] can’t eat, how can they learn?
—A woman, Kebele 11, Ethiopia

Poor people are disadvantaged by lack of information, education, skills and confidence. Many factors contribute to limited personal capability, including physical isolation, being cut off from the powerful and wealthy, lack of access to media and limited schooling. All these contribute to limited confidence, and together they reinforce powerlessness and voicelessness and marginalization in society.

Lack of Information

We do not know anything.
—A middle-aged man on rights and the law, Razgrad, Bulgaria

Opportunity is a contact.
—Discussion group participant, Vila Junqueira, Brazil

Poor people are acutely aware of their lack of information and lack of contacts to access information. Across countries, poor men and women discuss how these put them at a disadvantage in their dealings with public agencies, NGOs, employers, traders and lenders, and contribute to their feelings of powerlessness. Prejudice and discrimination add to physical isolation and combine to further isolate people from information and new economic opportunities.

Not knowing about services, rights and meetings or about how to gain access to them is another deprivation of the poor. The many impacts of the lack of information on poor people’s lives can be seen from exploring their experiences in one country, Vietnam. In two districts in the Tra Vinh region of Vietnam physically isolated people cite lack of information and poor access as their biggest constraints. In one area isolated and remote households report that they do not hear of impending credit program services, and those who benefit most tend to be family and friends within the leaders’ social networks. In other remote areas, poor families say that lack of information about when government workers will be near the area means that they miss accessing much-needed services. In one commune, poor people say they miss free vaccinations for their children because they miss the health worker’s visit.

Lack of information about planned government actions often leaves people angry, further deprived or confused. In a village in the district of Duyen Hai farmers said that they had not been consulted before irrigation
canals for shrimp farmers were constructed across the village farmland. This led to waterlogging and made much of the land useless. Researchers write, “Farmers claimed that they were not forewarned; rather they were invited to attend a meeting and informed that the decision had already been made. Since land-use certificates have not been issued in this village, no compensation will be paid for lost land, as local farmers have no legal claim to it.” In another village, women indicate that they feel vulnerable because of lack of information, not knowing about government decisions and having no say in community issues. Mrs. C., whose family lost 4 cong of land, said, “What can I say? I did not complain about losing the land because they are the government and I am a citizen and we don’t dare stir things up or challenge anyone.”

Isolated people also often find out about meetings after they have happened. A woman from another community says, “I have lived here for 10 years and never been called to a meeting of any kind.” In Ha Tinh, Vietnam a participant says, “I live quite far from other people... By the time I hear about things, the opportunity has passed.” Not knowing and being out of touch also affect poor people in cities and towns. The researchers in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam found in the three urban districts they visited that the poorer people are, the less they know about the welfare services in their area.

Poor people in Bulgaria report similar experiences. Participants in Plovdiv complain of lack of information about humanitarian aid from the Red Cross: “Who has the right to get this aid? Well, those who happen to be in the hospital the same day, for example, for taking medical tests, are more eligible.” Discussion group participants in Razgrad state that the mayor controls the social assistance rolls and the police. They feel that municipal services could improve if they had more control over the mayor and had somebody to explain to the people what the law is, what they are entitled to, and to whom they could make complaints against the mayor.

In Isla Trinitaria, Ecuador there is a lack of awareness of various public institutions and NGOs that work in the area. People say lack of publicity about the activities of organizations prevents them from reaching the majority of people in the settlement. A discussion group states that they feel uninformed, “we are trying to see how we are fooled.” Their overall despair with lack of information about government action that affects their lives, and over which they have little control, can be summarized by a discussion about the president of a district committee: “We don’t know anything about him”; “we know that once he brought medicines”; “we don’t know anything”; “he works on water affairs.” A leading issue of concern to them was the possibility of eviction, of being removed from an embankment even though “the people are not informed about what is going to happen.” Other groups used stronger language to express their vulnerability and growing despair fueled by lack of information about proposed government action. According to one participant, “I feel insecure, I am in the hands of the mayor... what can we do, to whom should we turn?... I would like to have a machine gun to kill them, the first one who gets into my house... working for the right [to a
and losing everything is very sad. Leave it to God. He will be coming very soon....”

**Telephones, Media and Information Technology**

The well-off have telephones, car... computers, access to services, live on the labor of others and have leisure.

— A poor woman, Morro da Conceição, Brazil

Poor people's isolation from information is compounded by lack of access to communication and information technology, including telephones, Internet, radio, printed material and television. The degree of isolation varies across regions.

More in some parts of the world than in others, poor people talk about the importance of telephones to increase their connectivity to information, such as the market prices for their goods and other knowledge about the outside world. In Millbank, Jamaica the need for telephones was mentioned by several discussion groups. The researchers write:

The community feels very strongly that the market exists for their enterprise and the road and telephone would lead to the creation of an economically viable industry. However, they ranked telephones as more important as they believe these will provide income earning opportunities and a faster response time to health or other emergencies that may arise in the community.... The lack of telephones was a recurring theme, possibly derived from a sensed of alienation through the remote location. Aside from the telephone, the young men and women have a craving for information technology, and are well aware of the Internet, seeing enterprise opportunities for marketing their products in the area.

In other discussion groups in Millbank, women equate the telephone to the local bridge across the river. In one group, a woman declares “this is the year 2000, the age of technology; it is full time that we get a telephone.” In Little Bay, Jamaica lack of telephones and post offices is a problem identified by all discussion groups. Discussion groups say that while poor road conditions lead to their isolation, the lack of telephones make their problems even more acute. This is seen as contributing to the high unemployment among women as they are unable to respond to job advertisements in newspapers. In Bower Bank, Jamaica a young woman again highlights the need for telephones, and suggests that calling people anti-technology is a way of teasing them as backward. A few older men in this community had cellular telephones and were seen using them in public.

In the Kyrgyz Republic as well, telephones receive frequent mention as a way of solving problems, accessing timely emergency health assistance
and information about prices. In Turusbek, people say they are ill informed because of bad roads and no telephones or newspapers. In Bedsa, Egypt women await the installation of a new telephone facility to put an end to their isolation. In Binh, Somaliland poor people say that in the absence of telephones, messages are still carried over long distances by runners. In Mtamba, Malawi poor people report great difficulties with placing a telephone call to the hospital to request an ambulance when someone is very sick.

Newspapers are valued as sources of information even where literacy is low. A program in Lao Cai, Vietnam to distribute radios to remote H’mong households is much appreciated.

The power of computers and computer-related skills to generate new employment opportunities, as well as increasing access to information, is mentioned by some parents, but primarily by young people in Eastern Europe. In Uchkum, Kyrgyz Republic parents complain that teachers are not teaching their children modern computer skills because there are no computers in schools. In Tiekovo, Russia while the employment bureau is rated low for not having paid employment benefits for three years, young girls speak favorably of their launching new computer training courses.

**Lack of Education**

In Nigeria, if you are not educated, you cannot get a job, and no job determines position in the society. Our parents did not go to school, and so we are poor today. Education can change this.

—Participant, a group of youths, Dawaki, Nigeria

I dreamt that I was sending them to university, that they may be somebody but I am afraid that secondary school is as far as they can go.

—A mother, Bratunac, Bosnia and Herzegovina

They sentenced me to death when they did that.

—A woman from El Gawaber, Egypt speaking of being forced by her parents to withdraw from school

Poor people make distinctions between literacy and education. For reading and using documents, for checking prices, and for avoiding exploitation, they see basic literacy as a key ability. Lack of literacy and numeracy makes poor people vulnerable, and minority groups seem especially exposed. Participants from indigenous communities in Ecuador mention that their illiteracy makes them “an easy target for fraud by businesses.” In the words of an indigenous woman from Asociación 10 de Agosto in Ecuador:
Because we had no schooling we are almost illiterate. Sometimes we cannot even speak Spanish; we can’t add. Store owners cheat us, because the Indians don’t know how to count or anything else. They buy at the prices they want and pay less. They cheat us because we are not educated.

Many poor people emphasize the importance of literacy for accessing jobs. A 51-year-old man from Tabe Ere, Ghana tells the researchers that he is blind, meaning that he is illiterate, and this is why he and so many others in his village can never get a job in the nearby town. In Bangladesh and India high levels of illiteracy are widely viewed to be key reasons for underemployment. A participant in a women’s discussion group in Little Bay, Jamaica says, “If we could read we could go to Negril to get good work.”

Poor people in community after community indicate that they value education highly as a key to a better future for themselves and especially for their children. In Ha Tinh and elsewhere in Vietnam, men, women and children are all very concerned about education and see it very clearly as one of the few means to break the cycle of poverty “because it is very hard to live on agricultural production.” Nevertheless, the poor identify many barriers to education. The high costs of school even when school is “free” is perhaps the most pressing obstacle that poor people raise when discussing education, but problems of distance, the need for children’s labor, and the quality and relevance of the schooling also figure in many discussions.

The Strain of Costly and Distant Schools

Even though my two daughters are of age to go to school, they don’t go because I have no money to send them. The big one is six and should go to primary school but I can’t find the money to buy a uniform, shoes or bag. My other daughter used to attend Millbank Basic School but had to stop because I can’t afford the $500 for school fees. My son will be ready for school in September but I can’t see how I’ll be able to send all three of them to school…. I want to learn to read and write, get good work so that I can send my children to a good school, so that they will not have to farm but will be able to get good work.

—A poor woman, Millbank, Jamaica

There are wrenching testimonies from all regions in the study of poor families that struggle with difficult decisions of whether to invest in their children’s education. For the poorest families, sending a child to school can imply very serious costs related both to income lost and to school fees, clothes, supplies and other expenses like payments to teachers, building and furniture funds and so on. Where parents do manage to send and keep their children in school, they often make tremendous sacrifices. A poor man in
Duckensfield, Jamaica with seven children explains, “I use most of my pay to school the children so that makes it impossible for me to build a good house.”

In Ho Chi Minh City in Vietnam one poor women explains that “her son just plays all day instead of going to school” because she is unable to raise the fees that must be paid at the beginning of the school year. In some study sites in Vietnam teachers reportedly humiliate children in front of the class by discussing how their parents have not yet paid their fees. Children prefer to withdraw from school rather than face this humiliation.

Reports from Zambia and Nigeria also are full of stories about profound difficulties with covering school fees and being forced to withdraw children from school. An elderly woman from the village of Tash Bulak, Kyrgyzstan shares her stark choice of only being able to educate her sons:

When our children were small, it was easier to take care of them. Now they need to go to school, which means they need clothes, and shoes, and school supplies. We don't have enough money, so only two of our children, two sons, attend school, and our daughters stay at home, because they have no shoes and the school is located very far from here, 6 kilometers. The boys walk this distance. Occasionally some driver would pity them and give them a free ride.

In some regions the hardship of covering fees is a relatively new phenomenon. In Indonesia study participants report that only recently have they been unable to afford the fees due to the economic crisis. In Pegambiran, some discussion group participants expressed concerns that many families who needed special assistance with school fees were not covered under the existing safety net programs. In the former Soviet Union, the cost of schooling is a leading concern because in the past education was free. As a man from Dimitrovgrad, Bulgaria shares,

I have to pay a fee of 23,000 leva for the kids. Where on earth am I supposed to find this money? I simply don't have it! So I tell them that I can't afford it. “Then take your kids home!” So who's to look after them at home... Now tell me how am I supposed to find this money? ... How could I raise this money... pay day-care fees, go and pick the kids up from the day care—how? This means I'm forced to start stealing—I'm a 50-year-old man.

Researchers from Kyrgyz indicate that education has become an “acute” problem due to the “constant need of parents to contribute their money for needs of the school” and for books in both rural and urban
areas. Similarly, in Egypt fees for education are new, and many express difficulties with payment.

In addition to educational costs, small group discussions about schools frequently raise concerns with the long distances that children must travel to reach school. In some villages this seems to pose a more formidable barrier than the problem of costs. In rural Ghana both men and women stress the lack of educational facilities as an issue. In Bangladesh all the study areas identify the lack of school facilities as an important problem and view the traveling required to attend distant schools as a key constraint for not sending children to school. In Gowainghat, adolescent girls often do not go to secondary school because young boys tease them in the road.

In Bosnia, where schooling was interrupted by the war, access to education is a serious concern in discussion groups of youth and women of all ages. In Somaliland people note a simple lack of educational facilities due to the war. In some war-affected areas of Sri Lanka it is reported that the poor do not send children to schools in outside villages due to security concerns, despite the poor quality of local schools.

By contrast, satisfaction with improved access to school is mentioned in a discussion group from the Chemusa, Malawi: "In the past schools were very far, about 5 km away. These days our children are just walking 2 km to Mbayani for their school." The communities visited in Malawi consistently mention education as a relatively low priority, although often still among the top 10. This may reflect the satisfaction with the government's policy of free primary schooling in addition to opening new schools and the urgency of other needs.

Children's Labor Needed

At times of disaster... children are taken out of school and are sent to towns to be employed as servants and requested to send money to their parents in the farmlands.
—Poor young men in Dibdibe Wajtu, Ethiopia

As a teacher from Nuevas Brisas del Mar in Esmeraldas, Ecuador explains, parents find it difficult to keep their children in school because they are often needed in more immediately productive activities: "Children have gone... Many have to shine shoes for a living.... We started out with 30 students and finished with 20. There is a desertion of five to ten students per level." In Freeman's Hall, Jamaica, it is common practice for parents to keep children away from school on Fridays to reap crops for the main market on Saturday.

In Dimitrovgrad, Bulgaria some children "dig for scrap instead of going to school," meaning that they steal wires and any other metal that is available. In Ethiopia researchers write that in rural areas children between the
ages of 6 and 12 are more likely to tend cattle than attend primary schools. When they attend, they are taken out at times of crisis to help the family.

Problems of Quality and Relevance

This school was ok, but now it is in shambles, there are no teachers for weeks. It lacks competent principals and teachers. There is no safety and no hygiene.
—Discussion group, Vila Junqueira, Brazil

In many communities, problems of educational quality and relevance come to the fore. In India people mention teachers who only come to school two days a week. Discussion groups in the favela of Vila Junqueira, Brazil express frustration with both the staff and security. Participants in Samalankulam, Sri Lanka speak of shortages of both teachers and classrooms. The researchers who visited Cañar, Ecuador report that discussion groups felt that “high school graduates are not well prepared ... they don’t teach well.”

Problems of abuse and corruption also touch schools. In villages in Egypt, participants report that parents may be forced to pay special tutoring fees lest their child “is made to fail.” In the Kyrgyz Republic, discussion group participants say a university diploma used to be more prestigious “because now people can buy diplomas.”

Some poor people also raise deep concerns about the relevance of schools to employment prospects. Many express bitterness that education does not necessarily bring a better future. As an older women from Duckensfield, Jamaica explains,

My husband and I make all the sacrifice to send our children to school out of our very small wages and because of that we couldn't build a proper home up until now... how my husband and I spend all of our little earnings on education for the children and two of my children can not get work to support us and we are old people now.

Similarly in Egypt, Ethiopia and Ghana people voice frustration because even with education finding jobs is extremely difficult. In Egypt, even technical schools are criticized for being overly theoretical and not opening up the job market. In Samalankulam, Sri Lanka the researchers note that youths who complete their education “are forced to take up agriculture as they cannot find employment to suit their educational background.”

Among study participants who managed to escape poverty, education is indeed mentioned but with strong regional differences. A 57-year-old shopkeeper from Nova Califórnia, Brazil credits hard work and education for helping him overcome the “precarious nature” of life: “I always worked a lot and have my degree. Today I have my business here, and it is enough to live quietly.”
Lack of Skills

A bad life is when you cannot find employment and have no money and no useful knowledge.
—A poor man, Kebele 30, Ethiopia

I live in the hope that things will be better for the children, that they will complete school, learn some trade.
—A poor woman, Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina

Poor people don't know how to manage a business, and so they can't improve their situation.
—Discussion Group of elderly men, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam

Although I live with my mother, right now I am on my own. I have been kept back from society. There is no training center in this community nor employment for me as an unskilled young man.
—Poor youth, Little Bay, Jamaica

In many parts of the world poor people speak about the importance of learning practical skills to enable them to make a livelihood. Participants in Las Pascuas, Bolivia link unemployment to lack of schooling and training: "If they are trained, they have greater knowledge, and they are able to get work doing whatever." The importance of skills acquisition also emerges strongly from life stories of people who have escaped poverty. Informal apprenticeships with relatives and learning by observation are cited for agricultural and livestock jobs as well as for crafts, small manufacturing and trading. Two different life stories follow:

Ali Karibo of Adaboya, Ghana was the first son of eight children. His father was a poor farmer who had no cattle but a few sheep and goats. The piece of land he had bought was very rocky so he did not do much farming. Ali had no formal education but according to him, his father taught him how to farm on rocky land. "My father fitted a hoe and gave it to me." His father died when Ali had not reached a marriageable age and the mother was too weak and poor. At that early age of 14 years he saw that he had no help but God. He said he worked hard on the rocky soil to remove the rocks. This has brought him fame and peace of mind. Those who know him use him as an example to encourage their children.

As a farmer, Ibu T of Kawangu, Indonesia does not own any rice fields. She owns an unirrigated field to plant tomatoes,
cowpeas and mung beans. Eighty percent of the yield is sold in the market. She said, “I used to be poor but things have changed. My life is better off because I worked hard such as planting vegetables and weaving cloth to be sold.”

Young people in particular are aware of their lack of skills as limiting their income-earning opportunities. But it is rarely only lack of skills that is limiting. A poor 20-year-old young man in Jamaica said, “I would like to see some major improvements towards youth in the community skills training and a market for produce...I would like skill in woodwork, furniture building, art or carving.” When asked why he wasn’t doing carving or woodwork right now, he responded: “Do I have tools and money to start? But if we as youth have skills training, that would help and some financial help as well so I could help myself to better my life.”

Sometimes however, even those with skills report difficulty in finding jobs. Men in Cassava Piece, Jamaica observe that there are few opportunities even for those with masonry, carpentry, and tiling skills.

Low Self-Confidence and Self-Worth

When I had nothing, everybody neglected me. The boss scolded me for any kind of silly mistakes. However, now I am not working as a day laborer and so everybody respects me.

—A poor man, Khaliajuri, Bangladesh

A human being without roots doesn’t have meaning.

—Community leader, Bode, Recife, Brazil

Poverty demoralizes us, I feel humiliated. Therefore, I never leave the village.

—A sick woman, Tash Bulak, Kyrgyz Republic

Lack of confidence is frequently mentioned as a result of poverty. Sometimes this poverty is the result of loss of confidence, especially from having been unemployed for some time. In Bosnia the inability to find a job makes people feel worthless to themselves and their families. Low self-confidence can lead to self-isolation. Young men in Bower Bank, Jamaica rank absence of self-confidence as the second biggest impact of poverty:

Poverty makes us not believe in ourselves. We hardly leave the community. Not only are we not educated, but we also don’t have a street-wise education. Some people don’t know how to behave when they go beyond their community because they are so frustrated, locked up in the house all day. They don’t have an understanding and therefore can’t relate. Some would say that ghetto people don’t know how to behave.
Poverty, illness, disease, loss of livelihood sources and discrimination all combine to deplete poor people's confidence to continue with the struggle. A 27-year-old girl from a village in Ethiopia in which many people were lepers says: “Yes, most of us who reside in this village are lepers. Even though at present I am not suffering from leprosy, my mother was a leper. So everyone knows that I am the daughter of a leper's family. Even though the community has not excluded me officially, there is no attempt to accept me as being part of this society. And I also feel so.” A blind man in Doryumu, Ghana said, “no one recognizes me. I have a big name only when I move in the streets with children following me. That is all the recognition I have, with the children. No one has even invited me to any meeting.”

Lack of hope and being unable to see a way out does for some result in madness and suicide. Giving up and being overwhelmed is described as “dying on your feet” by a man in Kebele 30, Ethiopia; “being on the edge of madness, going crazy” by a woman in Krasna Poliana, Bulgaria; “people do not smile, they look sad” by a woman in Tash Bulak, Kyrgyz Republic; “not seeing the light of happiness” according to an older man in Khaliajuri, Bangladesh; and finally “hanging oneself” by a poor man in Jalal Abad, Kyrgyz Republic.

A community leader named Pedro in Bode, Brazil started community cultural work to counter the sense of alienation and sense of worthlessness among youth. His understanding of the social and psychological consequences of poverty started with his own life experience and observing as a young child his single mother who had to constantly “fight a lot and had to sacrifice herself as a washerwoman.” For Pedro, the only way to improve the quality of life in the community is through classes in arts and vocational courses.

Part II. Keeping Poor People Powerless: The Many-Stranded Web

No one cares about us. We have no rights whatsoever.
—Men's discussion group, Krasna Poliana, Bulgaria

Poor people are held down not by one deprivation but by multiple deprivations. This section first presents the many-stranded web of powerlessness based on analyses of poor people's experiences. It then provides one illustration of poor people's descriptions of multiple linkages and is followed by data on shocks and sequences of events that lead to the downward slide into poverty. The final section highlights the agony of choosing between two losing propositions.
The Many-Stranded Web

The dimensions of deprivation are multiple. Their connections are also interwoven. Not every deprivation applies all the time. The combination of deprivations is specific to people, households, social groups, communities, regions, countries, climates and seasons. What poor people have in common is how often and how strongly the dimensions combine to keep them powerless and poor.

Poor people's experiences seem to converge primarily around 10 dimensions that add up to lack of freedom of choice and action, to powerlessness. These have been highlighted throughout this book and are summarized in figure 11.1. The dimensions of powerlessness and illbeing that emerge from the analysis are described below.

Precarious Livelihoods with Few Assets. Precariousness is compounded by limited ownership and access to assets—physical, financial, human, environmental and social. Hunger is not uncommon. Poor people survive through a patchwork of low-paying, temporary, seasonal, often backbreaking and sometimes illegal activities (chapter 3).

Isolated, Risky and Unserved Places of the Poor. Not only do poor people live in areas that are geographically isolated—remote rural sites or urban slums lacking transportation—but they also live in areas that are poorly serviced by basic infrastructure and that can be physically dangerous, unhealthy and unsanitary, or prone to natural disasters. Vulnerability is exacerbated by stigma, as poor people often find it hard to find jobs when their address is known (chapter 4).

Hungry, Exhausted and Sick Bodies. The poorer people are, the more likely their livelihoods depend on physically demanding work—often involving long hours, dangerous conditions and meager returns. Those who are hungry and weak and who look bad are often paid less and less reliably. Poor people also report difficulties accessing medical care due to high costs, corruption in fees and preferential treatment for those with influence and money. They frequently mention being asked to wait a long time and being treated with rudeness and indifference by medical staff (chapter 5).

Unequal Gender Relations. Exclusion of women from social, political and economic life limits their choices and increases their vulnerability when they are on their own. Violation of deeply entrenched roles of men as “breadwinners” and women as “caretakers” has created turmoil and domestic violence against women. Domestic violence against women remains widespread (chapter 6).

Isolating Social Relations. Social isolation includes the experience of being left out, looked down upon, pushed aside and ignored by those more powerful at all levels, with an impact on poor people's access to resources and opportunities. Poor people often face discrimination based on ethnicity, gender, caste, material poverty, age and the community where they live (chapter 7).
Figure 11.1 Dimensions of Powerlessness and Illbeing

Livelihoods & Assets:
  - precarious, seasonal, inadequate

Capabilities:
  - lack of information, education, skills, confidence

Organizations of the Poor:
  - weak and disconnected

Institutions:
  - disempowering and excluding

Behaviors:
  - disregard and abuse by the more powerful

Security:
  - lack of protection and peace of mind

Places:
  - isolated, risky, unserviced, stigmatized

The Body:
  - hungry, exhausted, sick, poor appearance

Gender Relations:
  - troubled and unequal

Social Relations:
  - discriminating and isolating

Places:
  - isolated, risky, unserviced, stigmatized
Insecurity and Lack of Peace of Mind. Poor people feel that they are more insecure and vulnerable today than 10 years ago. They lack connections, the ability to bargain for fair treatment or fair wages, access to capital, and protection by police and under the law. Breakdown of traditional social support systems with increased economic hardship adds to this stress. For women, widowhood invariably brings on destitution and social and physical vulnerability (chapter 8).

Abusive Behavior of Those More Powerful. Poor people often experience those who have more power over them as abusive, rude and uncaring. These include people upon whom they depend for livelihoods and services. Being forced to submit to such behavior compounds their lack of self worth and sense of powerlessness (chapter 9).

Disempowering and Excluding Institutions. From the perspective of the poor, there is a crisis in governance. Poor people’s contact with a range of state, private sector and civil society institutions is experienced as disempowering and excluding. Poor people recount countless incidents of humiliation, corruption, lying and cheating. Not surprisingly, poor people lack confidence in these institutions. As a consequence, many primarily depend on their own informal networks (chapter 10).

Weak and Disconnected Organizations of the Poor. Poor women and men participate in a range of informal and formal local networks and organizations, although by and large these groups are limited in number, resources and leverage. These groups and networks rarely connect with other similar groups or with resources of the state or other agencies. Isolated and disconnected, poor people’s organizations have difficulties shifting their bargaining power with institutions of the state, market and civil society (chapter 10).

Poor in Capabilities. Poor people are often isolated from information about jobs, economic opportunities, credit, as well as information on how to gain access to government services and their own rights as citizens. They also struggle with schools that are costly, distant and of mixed quality. Combined with poor education, lack of skills and lack of connections, poor people often lack self confidence. This compounds their helplessness when faced with hunger or exploitation (chapter 11).

Poor People’s Descriptions of Linkages

The multiplicity and interlinkages of the causes and effects of poverty are graphically illustrated in the visual analyses carried out by poor people. Again and again participants show their awareness of a whole range of causes and effects. Figure 11.2 is an analysis of the causes and effects of poverty by a group of women in Dobile Yirkpong, Ghana. It illustrates themes such as poverty of time and energy (“sleeplessness” and “always busy and no time to rest”), inability to pay school fees leading to a high dropout rate from school and illiteracy, and “inability to unearth potentials.” As else-
where with other factors like ill health, the analysis indicates a circularity of causation, in this case with theft, which appears on both sides.

To a striking degree many of the strands of the web of powerlessness can be seen to have multiple links and circles of causality. A discussion group of women in Freeman’s Hall, Jamaica shows this circularity of causality and with education.
Poorness causes education, particularly of children of secondary school age, to be cut short. Leaving school early at maybe 14 or 15 years old means you can’t manage a job and contributes to some early parenthood. It was considered that early parenthood led to more babies because of the resultant lack of a job. So the cycle continues with children having children and remaining poor so that they in turn cannot afford to send their kids to school.

Similarly a group of women in Los Juríes, Argentina described the circularity of deprivation:

There is a lack of food and there is malnutrition because parents can’t buy the food necessary to live...many kids don’t even get the minimum. Being poor, they don’t get the vitamins and because of this kids get ill.... Poverty brings illness from malnutrition or because they get wet out in the fields.... There is so much hunger and a child can’t go to school; has no shoes; doesn’t have equipment; and being poorly fed, doesn’t learn well.

**Shocks, Stresses and Sequences**

When you sow you hope to harvest at least the minimum, but unfortunately my efforts were in vain. I had to feed children and so I sold some cattle to buy wheat and clothes. There are six of us in the family. One sack of flour will last us for 20 days. So, we had to sell one sheep every month to buy flour, and in the end we had no sheep left. One can patch torn clothes, but how can one patch an empty stomach?

—A farmer, Tash Bulak, Kyrgyz Republic

Powerlessness and vulnerability compound each other. How shocks and stresses can knock and press poor people or households down is captured in individuals’ life stories. In each community research teams conducted one open-ended interview with a woman and another with a man who had always been poor or who had fallen into poverty. These case studies bring to life how shocks and stresses, often combined and in sequence, keep poor people poor and make them worse off, reducing even what limited control and choices they have.

A content analysis of shocks that triggered and stresses that contributed to their downward slides was conducted for 125 of these case studies. Figure 11.3 shows the triggers or shocks and stresses that precipitated an individual’s drop in wellbeing. The focus is on negative change, such as loss of land or a job or a decline in wages, rather than on more static conditions of
Figure 11.3 Shocks and Stresses Causing Downward Mobility

Triggers of Downward Mobility by Gender

Triggers of Downward Mobility by Region

*No value
poverty, such as “lack of land,” “unemployed” or “low wages.” It is precisely because these women and men had so little that they were so vulnerable when misfortune occurred.

In these 125 case studies, sickness or injury of a family member was the most frequent trigger for a downward slide. There are gender differences, however. This is primarily due to social practices that can lead to loss of social status, property and children as soon as a woman is widowed. Divorce and desertion are cited by almost 25 percent of the women as a cause of destitution, but are not cited by any men.

The second most frequent trigger or stress causing downward mobility was loss of employment or a decline in temporary and seasonal wages. This was reported more by men than women. In Eastern Europe and Central Asia people attribute rising unemployment to the closure of factories and businesses, layoffs, and the dismantling of collectives, with wage arrears, lack of pay, falling wages, or being paid inkind also important.

Life-cycle changes unrelated to old age refer to the added burdens of raising young children, the direct and indirect expenses of sending children to school, and the often very high toll of dowries and wedding ceremonies. Women in the case studies spoke somewhat more often than men about these impacts. Both sexes said old age and related problems of increasing physical weakness and vulnerability to illness figure prominently as causes of deepening poverty. Men mentioned natural disasters and deteriorating environmental conditions more frequently than did women. In Tash Bulak, a man from Kyrgyz Republic describes how three years of drought wiped out his savings, including his cattle, sheep and his peace.

Box 11.1 Sinking in the Trap: An Old Man in Khaliajuri, Bangladesh

He is 60 years old. He has four daughters. His economic status is declining year after year. Eight years ago he worked as a sharecropper. He had physical capacity and so could get loans from moneylenders. But as his physical strength declined, he could no longer get loans. He sold all his movable assets to give his daughter in marriage. Now he works as a day laborer in the fields or on a fishing boat. However, because of his physical condition, people are less willing to give him work. On average he earns Tk 20 to Tk 25 per day, less in the rainy season. If he fails to get work even for a single day, he has to collect food by begging. Due to unavailability of work, each member of his family had only one square meal throughout the preceding week. On the day when he gave the interview, he earned only Tk 12 working as a day laborer on a fishing boat. He bought 1 kilogram of wheat for Tk 11. It was to be the only food for the six-member family for that night. They had been without food for the rest of the day.
Impoverishment often occurred in these 125 cases through sequential and combined misfortunes and stresses. One mishap could make a person more stressed and less able to cope, and so more vulnerable to further shocks. The case study in box 11.1 from Bangladesh of a 60-year-old man shows how sometimes a set of conditions or an incident brings several of the dimensions and connections into play.

**Agonizing Choices**

To have my friends and son not following in my footsteps—to hell with everything else... I’d risk anything.

—A young urban criminal from Bulgaria

Powerless as they are in many respects, poor people face options that are often exceptionally constrained. In making choices, the best they can do may be to look for the least negative, the least damaging. They have little cushion against mistakes. They have to choose with care, for example, among different sources of cash or credit for daily needs or for an emergency. They are forced, again and again, to trade off one bad thing against another. The examples that follow illustrate both strategic choices and commonplace daily decisions.

These agonizing decisions take their toll. People cope by focusing on one day at a time, becoming indifferent, apathetic or hovering near losing their mind. Michael Akoese, a 46-year-old man living in Adaboya Ghana, confides to the researchers that he sold most of his property and assets, including his beloved motorcycle, to take care of his family’s needs. Unable to cope, he said he became mentally disturbed because he had too many things to think about at the same time. He remained indoors for many days before taking the decision to accept his fate and live on.

**Violent Abuse or Public Humiliation?**

In the Kyrgyz Republic women who suffer from domestic abuse are said to believe it is better to be beaten by their husbands than to raise children alone and that humiliation, which cannot be seen by other people is better than the status of a single woman. One woman says, “Very few women go to the health-care center if they get beaten by their husbands. If there is an apparent trace of beating on a woman’s face, she would rather invent some story than admit she was abused.”

**Go Hungry or Miss School?**

A widespread and agonizing tradeoff, sometimes faced by poor families daily, is between education and food. This may be especially acute where it is socially normal for children to go to school. In Viyalagoda, Sri Lanka many poor families restrict their expenditures on food to meet the education
and clothing expenses of their children; as one housewife comments: “Even without filling our stomachs, we spend for the schooling of our two children. Nobody sees what we eat.” The community report from Bedsa, Egypt notes that the poor struggle constantly to find their daily bread and to secure opportunities for their children through education: “We deprive ourselves from food, and we tear from our flesh so that we can find money to pay for the children’s education.” Even when poor children attend school, they may learn little if there is hunger in the household. A mother in Ha Tinh, Vietnam says: “My children are so hungry they cannot learn in school.”

Many others are below the threshold where sacrifices can secure schooling. A 62-year-old man in Ethiopia who works as an office guard is very bitter about his inability to feed his family. With all the expenses entailed, he says he cannot even think about sending his children to school.

**Suffer Sickness or Go Without?**

A repeated dilemma is to suffer from illness or starve. The tradeoff is between, on the one hand, pain, disability, and perhaps death, and, on the other hand, loss of productive assets to pay for treatment, leading later to less food and income, stinting, and even starvation (see box 11.2). The choice is stark—to feed some family members or buy medicine to treat

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**Box 11.2 Pigs and Pain**

A woman in Lao Cai, Vietnam is the only laborer supporting herself and seven other family members: her 70-year-old mother-in-law, her sick husband, and five children, aged 10, 8, 6, 4 and 1. Their precarious livelihood is breeding and selling pigs. They have one breeding sow and two piglets. Her husband looks young, but frail. He walks very slowly and is hunched over, although his present condition is an improvement from the days when he could not walk at all. Not taking the fluctuating symptoms seriously at first, the family used traditional medicine to try to cure his ailment for one year. The pain continued to increase, and he finally went to the village health station. They bought some medicine, but this failed to work. They were advised to go to the district hospital but stated that they didn’t have enough money. When asked why the family didn’t sell their piglets to raise cash for treatment, the husband responded that the piglets were necessary for them to manage their food security. Eventually he could not move his shoulders and legs, but with continued use of traditional medicine, he has been able to walk again for about one year. His back still hurts now, and he is only able to do minor work inside the house, such as sweeping the floor.

The husband’s suffering and disability are part of a livelihood strategy. His pain saves the pigs.
those who are sick. A pensioner in Sekovici, Bosnia describes his dilemma. His pension has dropped from DM 250 to DM 45. He is unable to produce enough from working the land to have any produce left over to sell as he and his wife are elderly and physically frail. What little extra is produced they “push” their children to accept. He said: “Today I received half a pension and I am wondering what to buy first—medication for the old woman, which is 18 DM, or a bag of flour, which is 14 DM—but I cannot buy both.”

**Poverty or Danger of Death?**

Those who join armed forces where there is active fighting risk death. In rural Ethiopia a discussion group of men and women report, “Life in the area is so precarious that the youth and every able person has to migrate to the towns or join the army at the war front in order to escape the hazards of hunger escalating over here.”

The team report from Ihalagama village, Anuradhapura, Sri Lanka says, Forty-five youths have joined the armed forces. They have passed their GCE Ordinary Level and Advanced Level examinations. Because they have not been able to find suitable jobs, they have joined the forces. They feel that their jobs will be safe as long as the war prevails. However, there is uncertainty as to how long they will be able to survive. “Every time there is an operation in the northeast, we are scared stiff until we know what the outcome is,” some said. The villagers said, “Joining the army means certain death. You are trained and sent to the battlefront. In 45 days, everything is over.” Another villager said, “Poor boys join the army. After all, do any from the wealthy class ever join the army?” However, the salaries are good and quite enough to lead a good life. Money the soldiers send home is used for the education of their siblings and to buy food. The job is good as long as you survive.

**Conserve Energy or Go to Work?**

Many in the former Soviet countries face the choice of staying home and in bed to conserve their energy and thus need less food or going out to do jobs unsure if they will get paid at all at the end of the day. A woman in Sekovici, Bosnia explains, “The pension is low, 39 KM or 200 dinars (17 DM). We get one part in marks and the other part in dinars, and it is not enough to eat normally for a month, let alone cover electricity and water and buy firewood for the winter. One cubic meter of firewood is 15 DM, and I need three or four meters to see me through the winter.” She like many others stays home to conserve energy.
Isolation or Shame?

Poverty can pose a choice between isolation and shame. Torn clothing and the appearances of being poor can isolate and exclude. The research team in Khaliajuri, Bangladesh writes, “Due to poverty... they cannot buy clothes for their family members; their wives and daughters cannot go out of their houses because they feel shy. They cannot participate in any festivals. They cannot give their daughters in marriage. At that time a person goes mad and wishes to commit suicide.” In Bosnia, unable to afford even small gifts, women isolate themselves at home. “I can’t socialize as wherever I go I need to take at least 100 grams of coffee and I cannot afford it. March 8 [International Women’s Day] passed and I did not knock on the door of a single woman, nor did anyone visit me.”

Child Neglect or Penury?

Women face acute tradeoffs between income and child care:

In Indonesia, [a young woman’s] husband...left and went abroad. She looked after their boy and girl.... She... wanted to dedicate her attention to them. She used to work, once, weighing junk. Her children were neglected and looked malnourished. She quit her job. That was her dilemma: if she did not work she would not have enough money; if she did, her children would not get due attention. After quitting her job, she frequently had a problem meeting her daily needs. Often she had to walk to the pawnshop to borrow money, depositing her still good clothes as security.... Because she often pawned her clothes and other belongings, and was unable to buy them back, she had only a few clothes left. She only went to the moneylender when she was really forced to because of the exorbitant interest rate of 20 percent a month.

In Ak Kiyi, Kyrgyz Republic:

The baby was wrapped in Gulaim’s scarf and kept crying. Gulaim, the baby’s mother, suffered from depression. When we entered the room, the baby was on the floor next to an electric heater that had in all likelihood been made by Gulaim’s husband. One would receive an electric shock if the device was touched carelessly. When asked whether she was not afraid that her children would touch the heater and get an electric shock, Gulaim said indifferently, “Well, we can’t heat the house otherwise. I tell the children not to touch it. Yesterday my relative, a school teacher who
lives in the school dormitory, left her children locked up at home and left for work, and when she came back, she found her boy....”

Migration: The Woes of Home or the End of the Family?

Children cry when they cannot get their meals in time. The wife quarrels with her husband when he fails to bring in the necessary money and grain for the family. The young ones migrate to the cities. This way many families have dispersed and marriages have been broken.

—An elderly woman in Mitti Kolo Peasant Association, Ethiopia

Migration has positive aspects. But in both India and Sri Lanka poor people say it is better to be at home and poor than rich but with the family separated. A case study in G Ceruwa, Bihar, India records that despite her misery, a poor woman has neither allowed her husband to go out of the village in search of work, nor ever migrated herself: “The woes of home are far better than the comforts of an alien land,” she says. In Banaran village in Indonesia a poor woman wants to work abroad but does not have the heart to leave her children, apart from not having the money to go. The decision, though, often goes the other way. A woman in Wewala, Sri Lanka says, “Yes, we go, but it is the end of the family.”

Be Cheated or Starve?

Poor people know when they are being cheated or offered unfair prices for their produce. Having little surplus or access to credit and faced with hungry children, they find themselves selling their produce at low prices or accepting low wages. In Freeman’s Hall, Jamaica discussion groups state that the middlemen pay the farmers after they have sold their produce. So in effect the poor farmer subsidizes the middleman. Short of cash, the poor farmer is then unable to plant as much as he would like.

Mina lives in Teikovo, Russia. After being laid off from her factory job she took on a job as a street cleaner in her district. For nearly three years her payments have been irregular and meager. Usually she gets about 100 rubles ($4) per month. She cleans a vast area near a big apartment building. Her boss sometimes fines her for her faults in sweeping or in clearing ice and snow. Mina is often hungry and eats mostly the cheapest pasta, drinks tea from dried raspberry leaves and eats bread and salt when she can get it. She jokes about her old TV set: “it is feeding me every evening. I take a program instead of my supper. Then I go to bed.” Her precarious four-dollar-a-month job is the only sliver between her and total starvation.
The Challenge of Powerlessness

An uneducated man can be dominated just with bread and water. The educated man does not want this; he wants citizenship.

—A poor man in Isla Trinitaria, Ecuador

I teach others now. I am proud of my job. Work is now my capital, work adds more value to my life. Before I worked, my life was empty.

—An illiterate woman who learned hairdressing, Foua, Egypt

I love my job in the soup kitchen...I do not earn anything but I feel happy, important...I am helping the children here to have a feeling of union...to know how to share with others in the future...I believe that you have everything when you help people. It is very good to give hope, to give happiness...I feel peace in it. I know what it is to live without having something to eat, what it is live in deprivation....

—A volunteer who is a widow and domestic worker, Borborema, Brazil

Poor people are caught in a web of multiple and interlocking deprivations. Together these combine so that often even when asked to “participate” and express their opinions or report on wrongdoing, they remain silent. Despite the imbalance in power and being overtaken by shocks and mishaps, many poor people retain their hope and grit to persist. Many emerge out of destitution to reach out and help others. What is remarkable is the resilience that so many show and how they battle against the odds to gain a better life for themselves and their children. A young widow of Geruwa, India speaks for herself and many others when she says, “Even in times of acute crises, I held my nerves and did not give in to circumstances. My God has always stood with me.”

The challenge for outsiders is to build upon poor people's initiatives, hard work and resilience in the face of seemingly insurmountable problems of accessing market opportunities, government services and civil society resources. The challenge for policy and practice is to empower the powerless in their struggles to find a place of dignity and respect in society. It is to enable poor men and women to enhance their capabilities and claim their rights. It is to increase their access to opportunities and resources. It is to enable them to take more control of their lives and to gain for themselves more of what they need.

Given the web of powerlessness and voicelessness, the questions change:
How can development policies increase poor men and women's access to opportunities and resources and their freedom of choice and action?

- How can poor women's and men's own efforts and organizations be supported?
- How can networks and federations of poor people's organizations (women and men) be heard and represented in decision-making that affects their lives at the local, national and global levels?

Notes

1 The findings about lack of information, education, skills and confidence are drawn from discussions on wellbeing, security, risks and opportunities, social exclusion, priority problems and concerns, and the quality of poor people's interactions with institutions. The findings on the “web of disadvantages” pool together information from all of the study topics and methods, including discussion groups' analyses and diagrams of the causes and impacts of poverty.

2 The Methodology Guide asked research teams at every site to obtain insights into the lives and life histories of five individuals or households. These were to include one poor woman and one poor man who had always been poor or one poor man or woman who had fallen into poverty. The account was to include major events or shocks—as recalled by them—in their lives. A subset of 125 life stories was selected based on completeness of information.