

ELITES, POVERTY, AND DEVELOPMENT

A Background Paper for the World Development Report 2000/1 on Poverty*

by

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Abstract

The ideas that elites in developing countries have about poverty are malleable rather than fixed, and are not tightly determined by the elites' economic interests. There is considerable potential to present the character, causes and solutions to poverty in ways that *mobilise* elites to want to do something positive about it. Elites are susceptible to the argument that they should sponsor public action against poverty, and to the view that poverty reduction may be in their own interests. More attention needs to be paid to presenting these arguments within national cultures and contexts.

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“As politicians know only too well but social scientists often forget, public policy is made of language”
G. Majone

1. Introduction: Redefining Poverty in Victorian Britain

In 1889, Charles Booth published the first of a seventeen volume collection, called *Life and Labour of the People in London*, that grabbed the attention of the comfortable and wealthy classes of late Victorian Britain. The readers were told that one-third of the population of London lived below something called a ‘poverty line’; that these were not lazy or undeserving folks, but “hard-working, struggling people, not worse morally than any other class” (Booth, cited in Himmelfarb 1991: 11); that they were struggling against the threat of descent into pauperism; and that both government and wealthy people should do something to alleviate this threat. Charles Booth and his co-workers changed the terms of the debate about poverty and public policy in Britain. They helped make governments, the comfortable classes, and even suspicious trades union leaders, sympathetic to the idea that government both could and should do something about the ‘normal poverty’ that affected a large swathe of the population. Philanthropic efforts intensified, and, within two decades government had put in place the foundations of what was later known as the welfare state.

The Charles Booth story has been told and retold many times. Four elements of it are especially important for present purposes.

i. Ideas about poverty are malleable.

Booth changed the perceptions of the comfortable classes about poverty. More precisely, he led them to see the *poverty* of the poorest 30% as a deserving and actionable problem where previously they had thought mainly in terms of *pauperism* - the destitution of a distinct, exotic, and morally-suspect minority, including street performers, beggars, prostitutes, who were unwilling or unable to improve their own lives (Himmelfarb 1991). British public authorities had for centuries been concerned about paupers and destitutes. But the policies they pursued to deal with these issues were shaped by perceptions that pauperism merited condemnation, blame, and

sometimes punishment. Those trades unionists opposed to government action to alleviate poverty were reflecting long experience of the harsh regimes of the Poor Laws, the workhouse, shame and stigma. Not only did Booth change perceptions of poverty and pauperism, but he persuaded society to pay attention to the needs of the 'normal poor' at a time when, far from being in some especially deep crisis, the poor had been enjoying improved living standards, relatively and absolutely. This illustrates that the realities of poverty and external understandings of them need not be closely related.

ii. Fuzzy definitions of poverty can be exploited for good purpose.

Booth was able to change public attitudes toward the poor partly because he took advantage of the ambiguities in common understandings of the terms used to refer to poverty. He re-framed *poverty* in terms that would resonate with the comfortable classes. His prime emphasis was not on poverty as material deprivation, but on notions of *class* and *respectability*. Booth's field investigators divided 'the poor' into classes, on criteria that left plenty of scope for subjective judgement and would fail any contemporary test of objectivity in social research. But this procedure provided authoritative-looking statistics to back up Booth's talk about *classes* of poor people. And that in turn enabled him to present the spectre of poverty as the threat of loss of *respectability*. The poor were continually struggling to stay above a line, both material and moral, that divided the respectable and deserving from the unrespectable and undeserving. Ideas of *respectability*, and fear of losing it, resonated strongly and positively in the minds of the comfortable classes of late Victorian Britain. They could empathise with people striving for *respectability* and haunted by fear of shameful descent into a lower class, especially into pauperism. The price of persuading the comfortable classes of the worthiness of the anti-poverty cause was a reaffirmation of the old prejudice that the 'poorest of the poor' were often the least deserving.

iii. Common (national) identity constitutes a moral claim.

Booth generated benign attention to poverty by helping to place the poor more squarely in the same moral community as the comfortable and wealthy. He told the latter that the poor were very much like them, sharing the same values, concerns and

fears. This was plausible and effective partly because both categories were understood to share powerful common identities: they were fellow Britons and fellow Londoners.

iv. Appeals to moral responsibility are very powerful when consistent with self-interest.

Booth did not mobilise the attention of the comfortable classes solely by appealing to their sense of moral community with fellow Britons and Londoners. He also continued a tradition of arguing that the comfortable classes would themselves be better off if the poor were to be preserved from destitution. There was a large repertoire of such arguments available. Some were relatively collectivist and other-regarding in spirit, such as the notion that the overall moral fabric of society would better be safeguarded if the poor could be protected against the moral decay that would follow once they lapsed “into the class of the very poor” (Himmelfarb 1991: 12). Others were narrower in inspiration, including the threat of social unrest and economic dislocation should poverty be left untended. Booth was able to use the Dock Strike of 1889 vividly to illustrate his case, arguing that it was caused by poverty and threatened to lead to wider unrest. Booth had a politician’s awareness of the mobilising potential of programs for public action that promise to satisfy people’s concern to improve their own lot in life while simultaneously offering to achieve some higher and more altruistic common goal.

2. Representing Poverty: The International Dimension

The lesson from the Charles Booth story is at heart simple: that there may be great potential to present the character, causes and solutions to poverty in ways that *mobilise* the non-poor to want to do something positive about it. The non-poor become mobilised to the extent that they (a) see poverty as an issue about which something ought to be done, whether through government or private action (b) perceive that it may be in their own interests, short or long term, that something be done; and (c) believe positive action to be feasible, i.e. that there is an effective instrument available (Toye 1999).

Why do we need even to raise these issues in relation to developing countries when so much attention has apparently been paid to the political and policy dimensions of poverty over so many decades? There are two parts to the answer, both relating to the important role that international aid and development organisations play in defining the poverty and anti-poverty agendas in so many contemporary poor countries.

International aid and development organisations significantly influence the terms of the debate, perceptions about poverty, and beliefs about what constitute effective and legitimate anti-poverty strategies. Indirectly and unwittingly, they may thereby reduce the level of real political commitment to anti-poverty programmes, in two ways.

- First, they establish standard international concepts and definitions of poverty that lack the potential to mobilise national elites morally and politically against poverty.
- Second, they propagate a narrow, economic view of the political process that leads to consistent underestimation of the political support for public anti-poverty action and consistent exaggeration of the threats and obstacles that face those governments that engage themselves seriously against poverty.

i. Standardised international poverty measures lack national political clout

International aid and development organisations ('the international development community') are obliged to standardise the terms they use. In relation to poverty, they standardise their concepts at two levels:

- First, the international development community deals in a singular concept of *poverty* rather than a pluralistic concept of *poverties*. That is to say, it aggregates a whole set of *deprivations* under one term: the acute under-nutrition and persistent hunger of the millions who routinely fail to get enough to eat; the anxieties of many millions of others whose daily bread depends on the breadwinner not falling ill and on the opening of another construction site once the current job is completed; the destitution of people who are too old or sick to work and lack a family willing to support them; the dread of powerless women that they will be harassed or raped outside the relative security of their household; the burdens heaped on members of minority social and ethnic groups excluded from schools, places of worship and sources of clean drinking water; and the

exploitation of illiterate bonded labourers by employers who know how to manipulate the police and judicial systems.

- Second, the international development community is, for lack of alternative concepts and data, obliged to adopt working definitions of poverty that are (a) always material (b) generally and more narrowly, measured in money terms ('money-metric') and (c) sometimes even more narrow, i.e. private household income. However open and sympathetic the international development community may be to wider conceptualisations of poverty - in terms of vulnerability, powerlessness, ill-being, deprivation etc. - they face little choice about how to undertake essential tasks such as comparing poverty levels in Bolivia with those in Benin. The only relatively reliable, comparable figures available relate to some measure of private income.

This standardisation around (a) a singular concept of poverty that (b) is in practice measured in money terms, seriously limits the scope for influential, sympathetic people in contemporary developing countries to 'do a Charles Booth', i.e. to present the causes, character or remedies to poverty issues in ways that will mobilise in-country sympathy and support from the non-poor. For the terms of the debate are already set by influential external agencies that sponsor and shape 'National (sic) Poverty Assessments', commission research, run workshops, solicit policy statements from government, and otherwise help set the parameters of debate. Once it is accepted that poverty in Bangladesh is defined in the same terms as poverty in Benin - i.e. a daily income of less than US\$1 (purchasing power parity adapted) - then certain political options are almost ruled out:

- First, it is not possible to reframe the problem into a set of more specific *poverties* that might each appear more manageable, in numerical terms, than the massive 57% poverty figure that emerges from using the 'dollar a day' poverty line.
- Second, it is very difficult to present poverty in terms that resonate strongly with local values and culture.

The comfortable classes in Bangladesh may perhaps be willing to view a range of particular *poverties* as grounds for public support: the hopelessness of old people with no surviving children; the shame and destitution of deserted mothers; the

embarrassment and determination of families who struggle to afford basic school uniforms for their children; or the vulnerability of street traders to police extortion. Each of these separate *poverties* may afflict a sufficiently small number of people that effective public action appears feasible. And some at least will be thought to be especially deserving of public action in the context of Bangladeshi culture. By contrast, the claim that 57% of Bangladeshis are poor according to the global standard because they live on less than \$1 a day does not resonate with local culture and whispers: ‘insuperable problem; turn attention elsewhere’. That is not the way to persuade national governments and elites to take poverty reduction seriously.

It is very difficult for the international development community to avoid using this standardised (singular, money-metric) working definition of poverty for its own purposes. Our concern is to limit the dominance of this conception over the poverty debate within individual developing countries - to minimise the adverse effects on political commitment to anti-poverty by ‘nationalising’ the anti-poverty agenda. That is the subject of this paper. It is also the best response to the second mechanism through which an internationally-defined anti-poverty agenda weakens national commitment: the adoption of a consistently pessimistic (because economic) way of thinking about the politics of poverty.

ii. Economistic ways of thinking about the politics of poverty exaggerate the obstacles to public action

Unlike economics, political science has no generally agreed scientific paradigm: no consensus about what the main questions are; the professional jargon that will be used to answer them; the values that inform analysis; and the specific analytical tools that will be used. Economists proverbially point in all directions in trying to answer a single question. In reality, they are the model of coherence when compared with political scientists. This is one of the reasons why political science, like several other social science disciplines, has in recent decades been heavily colonised by economists and economic ways of framing and answering questions. This economic political science, variously known as ‘public choice’, ‘rational choice’, ‘new political economy’ and a variety of other terms, is founded on the hypothesis that political action can to a large extent be explained in the same terms that economists explain

market behaviour: as the rational, informed behaviour of individual actors pursuing self-interested goals through marginal allocations of the resources at their disposal in some kind of political analogue of a market place. This approach to understanding politics has proved to be very stimulating, often very fruitful, sometimes wildly misleading, and above all controversial. It is deeply embedded in the research and intellectual activities of the international development community, partly because it makes political analysis accessible and comprehensible to the economists who dominate among the professional staff of international development institutions. A great deal of the thinking of the international development community about the political dimensions of poverty is framed by this public choice approach.

Unfortunately, this way of thinking leads to consistently biased expectations about the extent of political support within developing countries for active anti-poverty policies: the political obstacles to such action are exaggerated, and the extent of political support is underestimated. The argument has been made in detail elsewhere (Moore 1999). Two aspects are especially important for present purposes:

- One is that the very conception of poverty as material itself exaggerates likely obstacles to anti-poverty action. If poverty is solely defined in terms of inadequate access to material resources, then alleviating poverty necessarily implies that someone else will have to forego those resources. Poverty alleviation appears, in the language of game theory, as a zero sum game. By contrast, if poverty is presented more in terms of vulnerability, risk, or exclusion from public services such as health, education, sanitation, security and the law, then it ceases to be a zero sum game: potential solutions, such as insurance mechanisms and wider access to public services, appear far less threatening to the non-poor. Indeed, some professional groups, are likely to sense that they have an employment interest in expanding services to the poor. One cannot avoid the fact that any definition of poverty has political and moral implications.
- The second and more tangible point is that the core public choice assumption of rationally self-interested political action leaves little expectation that the non-poor will wish to do anything about poverty, except in the extreme cases where they clearly see that this is in their own direct interest.

A public choice analysis is inconsistent with the facts of the Charles Booth story. It tells us: that the non-poor have little positive concern for the poor; and that there is no scope for social activists, political entrepreneurs or governments to take the initiative to re-define poverty in a way that encourages the non-poor to support anti-poverty actions. The non-poor are hard-headed, rational and informed; they cannot be duped by mushy talk of ‘duty to the poor’ or ‘national interest’. The discourse on poverty that emanates from international development institutions does not normally mirror exactly this bleak and pessimistic view of the world. It does occasionally. More important, it routinely reflects the underlying notion that doing something about poverty is largely a zero-sum game: if there are winners there must also be losers; if the non-poor are ever persuaded to acquiesce to governments doing something for the poor, this will involve the mobilisation of large numbers of the poor themselves to bring enough political muscle to bear on the selfishness of the rich.

The view of political life embedded in the public choice paradigm is not only bleak; it is also wrong much of the time. The Charles Booth story gives us better leads to understanding the real politics of anti-poverty. Let us look in more detail at its implications for contemporary development policy.

3. Elites and Poverty in Developing Countries

Our main message, to repeat, is that there may be great potential to present the character, causes and solutions to poverty in ways that *mobilise* the non-poor to want to do something positive about it. What we are arguing against is ‘political economy’ interpretations of poverty, that present politics and policy as revolving *only* around materially self-interested groups and interests. There can be little dispute that this latter perspective does throw useful light on the real world. Politics is shaped partly by (rationally perceived narrow) self-interests. But it is also shaped by ideas and by institutions. Public policy is far less determined by the interplay of materially self-interested groups than ‘tough’ versions of political economy indicate. We argue here that there is considerable room to manoeuvre in relation to poverty and the poor, for three main reasons:

- The non-poor often stand to benefit from the reduction of poverty, albeit in the medium and long term rather than next week.
- Political leaders and intellectuals enjoy a wide scope to present the character, causes, consequences and solutions to poverty in ways that maximise the perceived common interests between poor and non-poor.
- A sense of moral obligation, especially to other citizens of the same country, can be very powerful stimulus to public action.

We make this case here, on the basis of the research we have been involved with on elite perceptions of poverty in poor countries, by addressing three main questions:

i. Why are elite perceptions of poverty malleable?

Why was Charles Booth able to change elite perceptions of poverty in Victorian Britain? Why should it be possible to accomplish similar feats in contemporary developing countries? There appear to be four related reasons why the perceptions that elites have of poverty are neither fixed nor precise reflections of the empirical ‘realities’ of poverty, but rather amenable to persuasive re-interpretation.

First, elites in developing countries generally know rather little about the poor. This is a pejorative stereotype that was largely born out by our interviews. Our respondents, chosen on the basis that they were members of small, nationally influential groups, were generally unable to make many conceptual distinctions among different categories of the poor, or to use any kind of categorisation of the poor to illustrate or enrich the arguments they were willing to make about poverty and the poor in general. They did tend to view the poor as a relatively undifferentiated mass. In that sense, ‘the poor’ are an imagined category. What is imagined can be re-imagined.

Second, as we have suggested above, the concept of ‘poverty’ - and related notions such as ‘deprivation’ and ‘destitution’ - are imprecise in ordinary language. There is a common core interpretation of the word ‘poverty’ in English, roughly captured by the phrase ‘lacking a socially acceptable level of income or material possessions’. But meaningful uses of the term stray far beyond that core. When people talk sympathetically about poverty, they are mostly addressing concerns broader than ‘lack

of a socially acceptable level of income'. There is no anomaly in talking of 'cultural poverty', 'emotional poverty' or even 'moral poverty'. The 'meaning-of-poverty' industry - the endless intellectual debate about whether poverty should essentially be viewed as destitution, deprivation, ill-being or lack of capability, and how far one should integrate into it notions such as risk, vulnerability and powerlessness - sometimes appears a little self-indulgent. But it is to a large degree inevitable, and the flexibility and ambiguity that underlies it can be used for positive purposes, to attach a range of positive implications to the term.

Third, this kind of 'attachment' can be effective in drawing attention to issues in part because attitudes to poverty are changing worldwide. The scales of legitimacy are shifting. Poverty is increasingly seen as soluble, at least in principle. Its persistence itself requires explanation. Notions that poverty is, for certain categories of people, either a normal condition or a punishment for past behaviour are becoming less prevalent. Conversely, to acknowledge the existence of poverty without at least appearing to wish to do something about it is becoming less acceptable. The (latent) assumption that poverty merits supportive public action - even if that is simply the promotion of general economic growth with an expectation of 'trickle down' - creates scope for 'friends of the poor' to present poverty issues in a morally compelling fashion.

Fourth, there is scope to use moral arguments to motivate developing country elites to support positive action on poverty because of the ambiguities in their relationships to the poor. These relationships vary widely from country to country. The biggest contrast that struck us was in the spatial relationships of elites to poor in Bangladesh and South Africa respectively. The Bangladeshi elites may have little direct interaction with the poor, but cannot avoid being in close proximity to them. Even in the elite residential areas of Dhaka, the poor are on the streets by day and camping out by night. By contrast, most South African elites live - and sometimes work - in areas where the poor are never seen. Despite these national differences, we can make some generalisations. The elites of most developing countries are far less economically dependent on the labour of the poor than those whom Charles Booth addressed in late nineteenth century Britain. The latter was composed to a significant degree of

capitalists who were employing the poor in (industrial) production. The elites of most contemporary developing countries are less likely to be large employers. More are dependent on politics and state service or on business activities like trading, banking or other types of (often international) services that employ relatively few people. Equally, a lower proportion of the poor are employed by large-scale capitalists. The poor are more likely to be unemployed, to be engaged in small-scale production or business, rural or urban, or to be employed in very small-scale enterprises. This restricted interdependence between elites and poor in the labour market may be bad news from a political economy perspective. It suggests that, all else being equal, the elites have little incentive to alleviate poverty in order to ensure the reproduction of a healthy, fit labour force.

However, the very large and highly visible lifestyle gap between elites and poor in contemporary developing countries has very different and powerful political implications. For this large difference in lifestyles, easily can, and often is, presented critically as a difference between 'national' and 'foreign' culture. The overseas holidays, the children in American schools, the enjoyment of Western media, consumer goods and lifestyles, the facility with English or French - so many of the good things of elite life can be made to read like accusations from a conventional nationalist perspective. They clash, also, with cultural and religious traditions that place a high premium on relationships of reciprocity between the rich and the poor within their communities. Where these cultural values resonate with the elite, as in Bangladesh, they can be – and frequently are - invoked to shame them into action. This leaves elites morally, psychologically, emotionally and politically vulnerable to charges that they are unconcerned about their 'own' poor because they lead an insulated life from them and their problems. The sense of discomfort that this can generate can increase receptivity to well-crafted arguments about obligations to do something for the poor.

In sum, elites know rather little about the poor, the 'facts' of poverty are wide open to interpretation, overt unconcern about poverty is decreasingly acceptable, and developing country elites are politically vulnerable to apparent unconcern. The combination of these factors creates wide scope for creative interpretations of the

nature and causes of poverty, potential solutions, and the ways in which non-poor people might be responsible for promoting those solutions.

ii. In what ways might elites perceive themselves benefiting from poverty reduction?

This receptivity will be further enhanced if elites can be presented with credible arguments that link their own interests to poverty reduction. To repeat, perceived self-interest and a sense of fulfilling moral obligations make a powerful mixture.

European and American history indicate that self-interest arguments were used frequently, often to good effect. Five distinct arguments appear to have been used, four based on some perception that the rich would become worse off if they did not do something to alleviate the condition of the poor.

- **Threat of crime** – Poverty leads poor people to commit crimes, that impact directly and indirectly on the rich: on their property, personal security, sense of well-being and comfort, and the resources they need to put into protecting themselves against crime. Alleviate poverty and you will reduce crime.
- **Threat of disease** – The conditions under which poor people live almost inevitably provide breeding grounds for diseases of various kinds, whether contagious or not. The non-poor cannot (completely) insulate themselves from these diseases. Alleviating poverty, especially by improving the living conditions of the poor or their access to health services, will also improve the health of the rich. For example, a well-founded fear of cholera epidemics generated elite concerns about urban sanitation in 19th century European cities, and positive action (De Swaan 1988).
- **Threat of ‘social unrest’** – The perception of poverty and inequality will lead poor people to support radical or revolutionary programs for social, economic and political change. Whether this leads to full scale insurrection or simply recurrent riot, protest and ‘everyday resistance’, the position of the rich will be made threatening and uncomfortable, the costs of maintaining public order will increase, and ‘business confidence’ will be threatened.
- **Threat to national defence** – At moments when wars have been fought by mobilising large proportions of the male population into national armies, evidence that large proportions of poor males were unfit for military service has both

induced a sense of panic and been a powerful lever to persuade governments to do something to alleviate poverty. The classic example of this was when 8,000 out of 11,000 British volunteers for the Boer War had to be rejected on health and fitness grounds. Correctly or not, the political elite blamed military incompetence on the weakness of the national physique (Searle 1971: 60).

- **Promise of mutual benefit** - In addition to - and mixed in with - these specific threats, are a range of more diffuse arguments about the benefits to the non-poor of alleviating poverty that are based on a firm notion of the societal interdependence between rich and poor. The sense that poverty presented a military threat led to further unflattering comparisons between the condition of the British and the relatively efficient economic development of Japan and Germany. A range of pro-poor institutions, from free school dinners to maternal and infant healthcare, trace their origins to elite interests in supplying the Empire and industry with more efficient labour (Searle 1971). Another example is provided by Charles Booth's claim that the moral foundations of British society would be strengthened if the poor could be secured against the threat of descent into unrespectable pauperism (above). Women's organisations in the early twentieth century United States were able to persuade legislatures to fund substantial family welfare programs on the grounds that the (democratic) future of the nation would be in jeopardy if many young citizens were to be reared in want and ignorance (Skocpol 1992).

The key question is whether, and in what ways, elites in contemporary developing countries see themselves as having similar interests in poverty reduction. Are the threats listed above real to those elites, and do they see them as the result of poverty? We can answer those questions only on the basis of completed fieldwork in Bangladesh and South Africa, ongoing research in Brazil, and the information we have been able to glean from existing literature. This information is partial. And, since there are the national differences we would predict, generalisation is hazardous. With those qualifications, we can offer five conclusions:

- The 'classic' threats that we listed above - crime, disease, social unrest and military weakness - have limited capacity to mobilise contemporary elites to do

something positive about poverty: in varying degrees, these are not seen as problems and/or not understood to be caused by poverty. In sum, poverty is not generally perceived as a source of threat to the elites themselves. It would not be easy to mobilise elites to do something about poverty, and certainly not the worst poverty, by appealing to their fears.

- This absence of a perception of threat from poverty is generally easy to understand in relation to social unrest and military weakness. At this moment in history, fear of insurrection by the poor is muted in most countries. Our interviews indicate that this is true even of South African elites. And the nature of modern military technology is such that the poor are generally not needed in large numbers to fight in wars of national defence (or aggression). Cash to purchase arms, a strong national economy and a relatively small but educated and trained cadre of professionals are the immediate sources of military strength.
- More surprising, the links between poverty and crime provide little positive leverage. All our elites see crime as a problem in terms of their daily lives. White South African elites are obsessed with the subject, and do view measures to tackle poverty as a potential solution. But the 'poverty' they link to crime is the unemployment of young men in the Black townships. The much more acute poverty of the rural Black population is barely recognised, and not seen as problematic in the same way. At the other end of the scale, Bangladeshi elites do not connect crime closely with poverty. The crime that concerns them is attributed not to the poor - who are generally described in patronising but benign terms - but to gangs and networks of urban thugs from 'middling' background, many of them connected to local politicians and to the law enforcement agencies.
- There is some element of mystery about why elites do not appear concerned that they are at risk from disease that is transmitted from the poor. This issue was never spontaneously mentioned during our interviews. One can certainly rationalise this in terms of the partial 'conquest' of most infectious and contagious diseases, the fact that poor country elites are vulnerable primarily to the lifestyle diseases of the rich, and their access to expensive private curative medical care. Yet, on objective grounds elites should perhaps be concerned. The World Health Organisation is concerned that old communicable diseases are re-emerging, some

in virulent drug-resistant forms. New communicable health threats such as Ebola and HIV are also being discovered (see Annex Two).

- Apart from the disease case, there is little scope to stir national elites into action on the basis of poverty-as-threat arguments. Insofar as there is potential to use arguments about common interests, it is founded on the more 'positive' arguments about enjoying 'joint gains' - as opposed to the more 'negative' theses about obviating potential threats to the elite. Even so, the classic 'joint gains' arguments sketched out above - strengthening a society-wide morality or nurturing future democrats - are not, in the cases we studied, very evident. For they depend for their appeal and credibility on a degree of sharing of lifestyle and culture between rich and poor that is not, as we have said above, characteristic of contemporary developing countries. There appears to be more potential appeal in 'joint gains' reasoning based on the common values inherent in the notion of 'development' itself. This featured very prominently in answers to our questions. A majority of respondents in all three countries placed a high value on economic growth, and saw it as the most likely and legitimate solution to reducing poverty. These responses may be seen as pessimistic in the sense that they suggest only a minority sympathy for the view that (extreme) poverty is a distinct problem that needs specific attention in addition to the attention focused on growth. But every cloud has a silver lining. The priority given to economic growth makes elites potentially attentive to arguments that poverty is a problem precisely because it is an obstacle to economic growth. Did we detect any such attentiveness? Yes, some. Large sections of each of the three elites we studied tended to view low levels of education as the principal tangible cause of poverty, and to see more education as the best single solution. They were to some degree open to the notion of a special emphasis on female education. Many respondents were unable to specify more precisely the causal linkages. A few people did perceive a link from education to development in terms of the quality of the labour force and 'national economic competitiveness' - and made plausible reference to comparative national experiences. More common was a highly unspecific and patronising conception of the poor as 'ignorant' and 'unaware', and an implied faith in education, with no clarity about how it might even in principle reduce poverty. But failure to meet our tests of logic and knowledge should not be permitted to obscure the strategic

potential of this understanding of elite perceptions. There is a widespread view among specialists that investment in mass education and human capital formation is a significant determinant of national rates of economic growth. Perhaps the case for more education for the poor can be argued in terms of the contribution to both (a) national economic performance and (b) dispelling 'ignorance'? Once it is accepted that it is important that poor kids attend school, other anti-poverty measures perhaps can be attached: health and nutrition programmes for poor children to ensure they make good use of the education that we are generously providing them; literacy and family planning for actual and potential mothers so that the education we have so carefully provided in schools does not become dissipated at home; perhaps even allowances so that destitute mothers can afford to send their children to school with clothes on their back?

iii. But do elites not benefit from the persistence of poverty?

The notion that some people are poor because the non-poor benefit and actively want to keep things that way is a powerful way of appealing to radical sentiment. For example: 'Yet poverty often serves the vested interests of the economically powerful, who may depend on the poverty-stricken to ensure that their societies run smoothly' (UNDP 1997: 95). As a general proposition this cannot be accepted. One can almost always find someone who appears to be benefiting from the misfortunes of others. After hurricanes strike, people in the building trade tend to earn more than before. The only useful test of whether they have a 'vested interest' in hurricanes is whether they would, if they could be given the choice, prefer to live in a society that is backward because regularly devastated by hurricanes, or in a more prosperous society free from hurricanes. The fact that non-poor people benefit from the cheap labour of the poor does not mean that they actively resist improvements of the conditions of the poor. Even if motivated by very narrow self-interest, they might find this leaves them worse off.

There are certainly cases where non-poor people oppose measures to benefit the poor. This appears especially likely in societies that are strongly ranked by visible markers of status. There some groups may indeed feel positively worse off if those people just below them in rank begin to receive education, dress better or in some other way

begin to lose their marks of inferiority. But that is not very surprising, and certainly does not add up to a general case that the non-poor (or elites) in poor countries typically have a vested interest in keeping the poor in poverty. That view appears to have been based largely on the special case of societies dominated by landed oligarchs, whose status and income depended in part in their keeping large armies of tenants or labourers at work in exploitative conditions. These same landlord classes have been the most militant opponents of democracy (Rueschemeyer *et al* 1992). Yet these special cases are fast disappearing. In the early decades after World War Two, the stereotype was applied, with some truth, to much of Latin America and to the Philippines. But even there the landlord classes have largely shifted out of agriculture, voluntarily or forcibly, and no longer dominate the state. They are at most one fraction of a national elite. Wealth is now largely generated and invested in banking, modern services, urban property and industrial production, where capital does not have the same vested interest in keeping labour poor or ignorant. It is striking that in Brazil, Elisa Reis found strong support among most sections of the elite for land reform as a solution to poverty. This partly reflects particular features of Brazilian politics and the (forelorn) hope that land reform would reduce migration to the towns. But it appears also to reflect an attempt by the contemporary elite to distance themselves from the stereotype of the rural oligarch, that is an affront to their sense of modernity.

4. Practical Implications

Many of the staff of international aid and development organisations have become habituated to ways of thinking about poverty and politics that accentuate and exaggerate the political obstacles within developing countries to government commitment against poverty. We do not wish to ignore either the fact of political resistance or the gravity of the budget constraint facing many poor governments. But the prospects for government and elite commitment against poverty are greater than is implied or assumed in the operational literature generated by international development organisations. This is partly because (a) elite ideas about poverty are

malleable, and (b) there is considerable scope to present poverty such that elites perceive poverty reduction to be in their own interests.

To re-present or reinterpret poverty is a *national* project. It is not something that can or should be undertaken by international development organisations. For they almost inevitably deal in and promote precisely the kinds of standardised procedures, concepts and values that have come to be problematic in the way poverty is understood in the development business. International organisations can (a) try to understand the perverse national consequences of their own (well intended) actions, (b) tolerate more diverse, national approaches to understanding poverty, and (c) encourage national actors to look for ways of presenting the nature, causes and solutions to poverty that maximise the chances of mobilising elite groups against poverty. This implies that international development organisations need to reject the straitjacket of the narrow and crude political economy ideas that dominate so much of their explicit and implicit political analysis of development issues. There is however some more encouraging news for them from our research. The ideas about the links between education, the labour market, national economic performance, motherhood and gender, that appear to provide a plausible basis on which to convince some national elites to be more active in tackling poverty, are also quite consistent with current development policy orthodoxies. The substance of some national poverty agendas may not differ radically from international agendas. But it is important that we demonstrate rather than assume that, and, where they diverge, try to build first on the national.

Annex One: Elite Perceptions of Poverty in Bangladesh and South Africa

The following summaries of research findings from Bangladesh and South Africa provide the bases for two kinds of comparisons:

- between contemporary elite perceptions of poverty in these two countries
- more tentatively, between contemporary developing country elites and the perceptions held by European and American elites in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century that helped trigger public action to alleviate poverty.

Findings from interviews are summarised in the following order: elite perceptions of the poor (their nature, numbers and locations), the impact of poverty on the elite; the priority given to poverty, and the kinds of antipoverty action favoured. The cases studies are concluded with a brief discussion of elite-poor relations in each country, focusing on the degree of identification and the sense of interdependence the elite have with the poor.

The information was obtained mainly in semi-structured interviews with about 100 members of the national elites in each case. Interviews were conducted between November 1997 and April 1998. We defined 'elite' in terms of power: the capacity to influence events and discourses. Our samples included prominent members of the political, civil service and military elites; media, business and NGO leaders; social elites involved in charity work; trades union and student leaders (where appropriate) and prominent religious figures. Interviews were conducted according to a predetermined list of questions, but respondents were free to raise issues they felt were of concern.

Bangladesh

Elite perceptions of the poor

Bangladeshi elite views on poverty were remarkably consistent across different categories. They have no illusions about the extent of poverty: 72% of our interviewees estimated that more than half of the population lived in poverty. They are clearly aware that poverty in Bangladesh usually implies inability to fulfil the most basic of human needs, and that the majority of the poor live in the rural areas. However, the elite have contacts, albeit mainly visual, largely with the urban poor. With few exceptions, they have little direct contact with rural poverty. There is a strong tendency among this urban-centred elite, therefore, to romanticise rural poverty. The rural poor are somewhat idealised and characterised as a relatively homogenous category of honest, moral people struggling against harsh odds and natural disasters. The urban poor are more of a concern but also viewed as relatively moral, simple people, whom poverty has forced out of their villages and into the cities. Our interviews with the people in regional towns whom we labelled 'regional elites' indicated more direct contact with the poor, a more realistic understanding of poverty, and a less generous attitude to the poor.

The impact of poverty on the elite

Urban poverty was clearly a more tangible concern for the elite, so we explored the potential for perceived impacts on elite welfare. Almost half the respondents believed that there were no links between the presence of poor rural migrants and increases in crime. Those who believed that there was a link (26%) tended to qualify this by stating that the crimes of the poor tended to be minor, or committed under conditions of extreme destitution. The perception across the board was that the petty crimes of the poor do not affect the elite, and that the non-poor, including other sections of the elite, were more likely perpetrators of serious crimes. This sense that the behaviour of the poor had no impact on the elite through crime is more generally true: there is virtually no fear that poverty might have negative impacts on elite welfare through the transmission of disease or the threat of social unrest. Insofar as poverty is a problem, it is not viewed in instrumental terms as a threat to the elite, but as an abstract, moral concern.

The priority of poverty

The weakness of any perceived threat to their own well-being means that the Bangladeshi elite's attention is not drawn to the issue of poverty as an operational priority. Poverty is not viewed as urgent, or as distinct from the more generic problem of national poverty and underdevelopment. Poverty tends to be viewed as a label for these pervasive, national conditions and problems. Most problems of society, economy, ecology and polity in Bangladesh can be, and are, talked about as poverty problems; the poor tend to feature only tangentially and indirectly.

Solutions to poverty

This lack of urgency is reflected in the kinds of action favoured by the elite. Solutions offered for poverty were often 'developmental' in nature, not involving an immediate attack on poverty *per se*. Business leaders and civil bureaucrats were relatively optimistic that the 'trickle-down' mechanism would come into operation, i.e. that economic growth would itself make a major contribution to alleviating poverty. The more widespread view was that economic growth is necessary but not sufficient, and that the crucial path for poverty reduction is human resource development, in particular education. Almost no support could be found for publicly-funded safety nets for the poor, partly on grounds of cost, but mostly, it seemed, because the elite felt that this kind of social protection would not enhance productivity, and could not be seen as the responsibility of the state.

This relates to the tendency of the elite to view direct assistance to individuals in need as the responsibility of other individuals or 'society', not of the state. Bangladeshi elites have a very clearly defined sense of social and religious obligation to assist those of the poor to whom they are close; these include relatives and other people from their 'home' districts or village areas, employees and domestic servants. Even state elites describe their responsibility to the poor in domestic and personalised rather than broad political terms. In part this emphasis on private charitable action reflects the lack of faith in state action. When asked about the desirability of increased levels of taxation to finance pro-poor measures, half of our respondents felt unable to answer, on the grounds that it was simply unrealistic to assume that government could actually collect more revenue or use it for any specified purpose. But the reluctance to

assign the state a central role in poverty alleviation also reflected a substantial faith in the capacity of the large development NGOs for which Bangladesh is renowned - ASA, BRAC, Grameen, Proshika. etc. Most respondents attributed responsibility for tackling poverty to some mixture of state, NGO and private action. Members of elites at the top of the civil branches of the state - senior politicians and bureaucrats - were more confident than others about government antipoverty action. But overall levels of confidence in the state are low.

Social consciousness and elite-poor relations: identification and interdependence

The (national level) Bangladeshi elite is relatively homogenous – an elite rather than a collection of distinct elites. The former Westernised, Urdu-speaking urban-based national elite has been replaced by a Bangla-speaking group that is, in comparative context, highly concentrated in the dominant city, Dhaka. The top echelons of business are increasingly occupied by Bengali Muslims rather than ethnic minorities. Individual members of the elite, or small families, straddle different economic and social sectors - politics, business, mass media, public service, the military, NGOs, and interact a great deal. Only the leading religious and trades union figures came from distinctively different social strata. While in competition at the interpersonal level, the Bangladeshi elite is not divided by any great political or social cleavage. In one important respect there is great potential for the Bangladeshi elite to feel a united sense that it is their responsibility, and in their interests, to support antipoverty action. Unlike in many developing countries, the elite are not distanced from the poor as a result of race, ethnicity, language or history. As a new elite, to a large degree formed since Independence from Pakistan in 1971, their cultural and religious practices and values are virtually indistinct from those of poorer and rural people. And Bangladesh has a relatively equal distribution of income¹. Such common ground between the elite and the poor certainly provides the potential for vigorous anti-poverty measures on grounds of national solidarity.

¹ According to the most recent figures, the richest 10% of the population of Bangladesh accounts for 24% of national income (or consumption). This figure is typical for South Asia - India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka each register 25% - but much lower than Brazil (48%) and South Africa (47%) (World Development Indicators 1998, table 2.8).

Despite the basis for a sense of identification with the poor, however, the elite have a weak sense of interdependence with the rest of society. They feel physically insulated against the effects of poverty, and their concerns are focused more on other sections of the elite than on the poor. The sense of social consciousness with respect to the poor is thus informed by moral considerations, and lacks the stronger impetus of self-interested motivations to reduce poverty.

South Africa

Perceptions of the poor

Given that poverty has only recently become an issue of public concern to most South African elites, it was remarkable that most interviewees gave reasonably accurate estimates of the proportion of the poor, at about 60-70%. This apparent knowledge about poverty was belied, however, by two mistaken perceptions. Prevalent among the non-ANC elite (i.e. people not closely associated with the ruling African National Congress) was a belief that South African society was not particularly unequal in comparison with other developing countries. This is false: the best available evidence suggests that it possibly has one of the most unequal patterns of income distribution in the world. Most elites - in particular non-African elites with fewer rural ties - tended to believe that (very visible) urban poverty was the sum of the problem, and failed to recognise the extent and gravity of rural poverty. In part this was based on a belief that rural people subsist on their own produce, and in extreme conditions migrate to the cities.

The impact of poverty on the elite

While the ruling ANC elite appear to hold strong views on social interdependence and the need to act on poverty, most elites do not share their views. Most South African elites do not perceive the prevalence of poverty to have direct negative impacts on their own welfare. Non-white elites are more likely to perceive such impacts, because they tend to be geographically and socially closer to the poor. Epidemic disease is not perceived to be a threat to most elites, partly because of improvements in public health services for the poor in recent years, and because elites feel protected through access to high quality medical services. Partly also, the white and Asian elites in particular, are uninformed about the extent of communicable diseases among the poor in urban and peri-urban areas. Neither is poverty a threat in terms of social unrest or rebellion, as many elites believe that the major social upheaval has already occurred, and that discontent is now largely contained through the democratic process. Industrial action is more of a concern, but the formal sector urban labour force is not seen as 'poor'.

Crime preoccupies elites across the board, appearing as a new problem for white elites who had previously been better protected from such threats. Factually, crime is

related to the extent of poverty. However, there are a number of reasons why elites may not consider crime to be a consequence of poverty. The first is that the more serious crimes, and particularly those which affect elites, are not seen to be committed by the poor, but by other groups, including organised criminal syndicates. A second is that the white elite tend to be fairly well-insulated against crime, with fortified houses and businesses, sophisticated alarm systems and private security guards. Crime is also more often seen as the breakdown of law and order than as a direct result of poverty. The perceived root causes of the increase in crime rates are, then, not directly linked to the problem of poverty.

The priority of poverty and antipoverty strategies

Given the misinformation the South African elite displayed about the severity of rural poverty, it is not surprising that poverty is not perceived to be an urgent problem. Other concerns and distractions (including crime and corruption), loom far larger in their perceptions. The ANC elite tend to be divided between believing that direct public action in the form of asset and income redistribution is the political priority, and taking a more incrementalist approach by stressing the importance of economic growth. For most of the rest of the elite, however, the only acceptable option is going for growth; poverty itself is accorded no priority.

There are plausible justifications for preferring the growth strategy. The scale of the problem of poverty in South Africa makes the prospects for public action appear excessively costly. The administration is assumed to be too rigid and inefficient to be an effective instrument for redistributive programmes. Most crucially, many elites believe that corruption would cripple state capacity to achieve much of anything, including poverty reduction. The perceived role of government in promoting economic growth is that of an enabler, a facilitator, but not the main engine. Elites also tend strongly to believe that economic growth is possible, despite the miserable recent performance of the national economy. Nor has it as yet dampened elite enthusiasm for policies which stress growth over distribution, who consistently argued that the benefits of growth would trickle down to the poor. Most elites anticipated that 'trickle-down' would or should be supplemented by government redistributive initiatives. But these should come later. Any attempt to give redistribution great

emphasis before growth accelerates would be counter-productive because the government's financial resources are too limited, and because vigorous redistribution would undermine growth. It would also mean higher taxes for prosperous groups, and most respondents of all ethnic backgrounds felt heavily over-taxed already.

To the extent that any action for the poor is perceived as imperative, this is in the urban areas. There are deviations from this pattern, but for political reasons, the ANC elite tends towards an urban bias. Inter-party competition tends to be more closely contested in urban than in rural areas. The urban sector is thus seen as the main political battleground. Rural dwellers are so widely dispersed that they are seen as less likely to be mobilised against those in power on any issue, including poverty. The key elites within the ANC all tend for various reasons to be preoccupied with urban issues, resulting in a focus on the needs of urban or peri-urban workers. The exception is the issue of land reform, which has generated considerable debate, but which remains an area of incremental change, out of fear of alienating Afrikaner elites.

Social consciousness, identification and interdependence

In a society as rigidly marked by segmentation as South Africa, the potential for the elite to view the poor as a whole as their responsibility is likely to be limited. The sense of elite responsibility for sections of the poor is very weak even within social segments, and virtually non-existent across these groups. Elites in this substantially 'modernised' society tend strongly to think in terms of generalised, impersonal initiatives - mounted by the government, and/or the private or voluntary sectors - rather than personalised obligations to their poor brethren.

Although the majority of the elite are distanced from the poor, and feel little, if any sense of personal responsibility for groups within their social segment, the ruling ANC elite have very different views. Divided though they are on the antipoverty strategies to be pursued, they do recognise the priority of poverty, and come to this position from an acceptance of the interdependence of all social groups. The major obstacles to promoting this view to other elites seem to be that they currently feel effectively insulated against poverty, and have little faith in the redistribution option.

Annex Two: Elites and Epidemics

One of the most potent threats which nineteenth century European elites believed poverty posed to their welfare was epidemic disease. The appearance of virulent new diseases which medical science was initially at a loss to explain induced panic in all social classes. No matter how hard the elite strove to protect themselves, they were never completely immune. But fear was not enough to engender social policy reform: it was only once the knowledge that epidemic diseases thrived in the living conditions of the poor had become accepted as fact that elite support for massive sanitary and public health reforms became possible. Contemporary developing country elites, by contrast, are unconcerned about the threat of communicable diseases. They may believe, as do populations in the now-developed countries, that there are no longer grounds for worrying about these diseases. There are signs, however, that they may be misinformed about the extent to which these diseases have been conquered. Their complacency may be misplaced. According to the WHO, many of the old epidemic diseases are re-emerging as a problem, particularly in developing countries. And while the poor always suffer more, the non-poor are never completely immune.

Elites and epidemic disease in contemporary developing countries

Cholera epidemics are not just history. Outbreaks swept through most of the developing world in the 1990s, including Latin America, where the disease had not been seen for a century (WHO 1998). More than 3300 deaths were reported in Peru alone (Nations and Monte 1996). Malaria and tuberculosis are also becoming increasingly difficult to control, as a result of microbial evolution. And it is not just the familiar diseases with which we are threatened: in the last two decades 29 micro-organisms connected with emerging communicable diseases have been identified (WHO 1996). The re-emerging threat is blamed on rapid, intense international travel; overcrowded cities with poor sanitation; deteriorating public health and the reorientation of public spending; and microbial evolution (WHO 1996: 1). While the poor always suffer more, the non-poor are never completely immune, even from the so-called diseases of poverty (see WHO 1999; Annex table 7).

The threats from old communicable diseases appear, therefore, to be real. Yet our research revealed that developing country elites are either unconcerned about these problems, or do not connect them to the problems of poverty. In an era in which global travel is so common, resistance to antibiotics is widely accepted as a major problem, and new diseases and new strains of old diseases are being discovered, it is striking that developing country elites seem unaware of the threats posed to their own health by the persistence of contagious diseases.

South African elites displayed surprise at being asked whether they were concerned about the threat from poverty-related disease: it had not occurred to most that such a risk might exist. When asked whether they were concerned about the relationship between poor living conditions and the prevalence of tuberculosis in Bangladesh, local elites unanimously expressed the view that the disease was caused by smoking. In this case at least, no connection was drawn between poverty and epidemics. It is possible to suggest that one reason for the lack of concern is simple: lack of knowledge about the extent and the transmission mechanisms of contagious diseases.

Elites also tend to feel insulated against the diseases of poverty. Although no member of an elite is ever completely isolated from the poor – they may have contact through their domestic servants, for example – this sense of distance seems to provide many of them with a psychological immunity from the diseases of poverty. An example of the elite response to the 1993 cholera outbreak in Northeast Brazil illustrates how they endeavour to distance themselves from the poor in situations which actually threaten them:

[P]rivate school children had daily hand-washing drills; five-star hotel restaurants washed vegetables in bleach; and luxury, beach front apartment residents treated private wells with chloride. Overnight, the already dual-class society, sharply divided: cholera-infested and cholera-free. There were those living with cholera and those defending themselves. Imaginary walls quickly rose seal off the wealthy enclave, Aldeota, from cholera-infested poverty zones of the periphery. Upper-class residents quietly dismissed maids, cooks, laundresses and nannies living in cholera-infested, lower-class neighborhoods. The rich prohibited their children from contacting poorer playmates, using public restrooms and eating in popular restaurants. Northeast bound tourists cancelled trips (Nations and Monte 1996: 1010).

The rich also have faith in their access to private healthcare, including travelling abroad for medical treatment. Elites may feel that they are individually better-placed to deal with disease if it strikes. And, unlike in nineteenth century cholera epidemics, contemporary elite thinking may be dominated by other health concerns that appear more threatening to themselves. Elite Bangladeshis, for example, worry more about the degenerative and cardiovascular diseases associated with wealth than poverty-related disease. The health problems of twentieth century elites may have the effect of making the more indirect threats posed by epidemic disease look weak in comparison.

Cholera in European history: knowledge and social policy

Epidemic disease all too graphically illustrated the connections between elite welfare and the wellbeing of the poor in the early nineteenth century. This was an era of unprecedented expansion of trade and travel between European nations and their colonial territories. One unintended import was cholera, the first global epidemic, which inspired panic and terror as it made its way along world trade routes and into the major industrial centres of Western Europe, where it struck in 1831. Unlike death from tuberculosis, which at least killed slowly, an attack of cholera could kill in no more than a matter of hours. The lack of medical consensus on the causes and means of transmission added to the chaos and fear that it inspired. Most crucially, while it was generally associated with filth and the conditions of urban poverty, no class in society escaped: it claimed significant numbers of the rich among its victims. Elites everywhere became gripped with ‘cholera phobia’ (Durey 1979).

The fear of cholera was not just the fear of death from a deadly and initially mysterious disease, potent though that was. Wherever cholera spread, the poor believed that they were being targeted by the rich, and conspiracy theories about poisoned water and body-snatching for medical research were rife across Europe (Durey 1979; Evans 1986). The official response, to establish harsh regimes of quarantine and cordons sanitaires, was also resisted by the poor. Cholera thus

engendered chaos and violent social upheaval, often destroying the carefully maintained stability of relations between the rich and the poor (Briggs 1961).

Fear alone did not drive social policy. As is now well-known, the crises engendered by the 1830s outbreaks of cholera had little lasting impact on sanitary reform (Briggs 1961). It was not till epidemics later in the century had clarified the causes and transmission mechanisms of cholera that governments began to respond by reforming sanitary conditions, water supplies, and improving the housing conditions of the urban poor. Two factors appear to have been crucial in preventing and controlling cholera. The first was knowledge: medical understandings of the causes of transmission had to be accepted by the elite. Initially, medical opinion about the transmission of cholera through water supplies was not universally accepted. This was in part because economic interests, in particular the importance of the free movement of trade, meant that accepting the contagion theory implied measures (quarantines, cordons sanitaires, disinfection) which were unacceptable to many elites, in whose interests it was to believe that cholera was not contagious.

Second, there had to be faith in the institutional means to respond. Most states were simply not strong or centralised enough to enforce these measures during the early epidemics, and initially at least, there was little pressure on governments from society to deal with the epidemics (Evans 1987).

The case of the last major European outbreak in Hamburg illustrates the impact of elite perceptions on the response to cholera. By the late nineteenth century, most Western European elites had accepted the contagion theory of cholera, which had confirmed the need to strengthen public health systems through such reforms as the Public Health Act in Britain. But in 1892 the Hamburg elite still resisted this theory. Trade-oriented as they were, they clung to 'miasmatist' theories of transmission, which emphasised the importance of specific local environmental conditions such as 'bad air', long after these had lost scientific credibility elsewhere. Unlike neighbouring cities which had preventive public health systems in place and were prepared to deal with epidemics, the authorities in Hamburg took a distinctively *laissez faire* approach to public health. The living conditions of the poor, conditions

in which cholera thrived, had not improved - they may even have deteriorated - since the earlier outbreaks. There was no official willingness or capacity to take rapid action to stop the spread of the disease when it reappeared. Nearly 10,000 people out of a population of 600,000 died in the outbreak of 1892, making Hamburg notorious throughout Europe (Evans 1987). Following this scandal of inaction, Hamburg authorities succumbed to the intense pressure to reform their approach to public health. Social policy was reformed to emphasise the housing, health and economic condition of the poor.

Two factors therefore conditioned elite responses to the threat of epidemics: the first was perceptions of the problem. Many elites initially felt that they could protect themselves against epidemic diseases, and fled or instituted strict hygiene regimes within their homes. Ultimately, however, the acceptance of the contagion theory meant that the costs to social cohesion and economy were felt to be too strong, and more inclusive strategies were adopted. Crucially, the elite had to accept that they were not immune.

Secondly, there had to be support for collective action against the spread of cholera. Individual and private initiatives to deal with the epidemic were ultimately found to be ineffective. There had to be support for state action, and this was only possible once the state had become strong enough to deal with the problem. During the early outbreaks in Europe, people had turned to religion for consolation, or had blamed the medical profession, foreigners, and Jews – the usual scapegoats of society. Official responses were unpopular and, usually, haphazard. As the state became stronger, it began to bear the brunt of the criticism for epidemics. Prevention entailed improving urban living conditions, which became increasingly the responsibility of governments.

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