

## CHAPTER FOUR

### WHY POVERTY IS A SERIOUS MORAL ISSUE

Poverty is one of the major social and political issues in Africa today. Not only in Africa, but throughout the world millions of people are suffering from poverty and its crippling effects. The effects of poverty on human beings are so drastic that the phenomenon of poverty merits the serious attention of governments, human and natural scientists, relief organisations, and especially, Christians.

Preventable death, for example, is one of the effects of poverty. Poor people can die for several more reasons than other people, such as a lack of food, diminished resistance to disease as a result of inadequate diet, deficient or no medical care, and exposure to cold weather as a result of insufficient clothing or shelter. Preventable death is by far not the only effect of poverty; others include stunted physical or mental growth, lack of education, deprived opportunities for personal growth and development, and so on.

Unfortunately the global community of states, churches, and aid organisations cannot claim progress in eradicating poverty or its effects, as the number of poor people still continues to grow today. The 1980s are called the "lost" decade, as life for the approximately 900 million poor people world-wide has steadily worsened (Wilkins 1992:169).

There is no doubt that poverty causes immense suffering to millions of people world-wide. Although poverty devastates the lives of millions of people everywhere in the world, especially in Third World countries, many non-poor

people ignore the plight of poor people. Why should all non-poor people in the world take poverty seriously?

Why is poverty a serious moral issue? There is a simple reason why everyone should take poverty seriously. The "scandalous particularity" conveyed by a detailed picture of what being poor means should function to "jolt people into an awareness that something must be done" (Wilson and Ramphela 1989: 8). Poverty inflicts damage to individuals and poses serious threats to societies with large numbers of poor people. Poor individuals function far below their optimum level and societies with a wide gulf between the extremes of "grinding poverty" and "massive wealth" can slip into social unrest and conflict (Wilson and Ramphela 1989: 17).

In this chapter I want to show in somewhat more detail why poverty should be high on the agenda of all people. Firstly I will show how poverty threatens the lives of individuals. The information for this profile of the effect of poverty on persons comes from social science reports done in South Africa (Budlender 1998; Grosskopf 1932; Malherbe 1932; Willcocks 1932; Terreblanche 1977; Wilson & Ramphela 1989; RDP 1995, May 1998a & 1998b). Secondly, I will argue that ignoring the plight of poor people seriously threatens the fundamental moral values and political health of democratic societies.

## 1. Poverty damages the lives of individuals

Poverty damages the lives of individuals. As in all cases of hardship or trauma, the damage that poverty does can stimulate positive growth and develop valuable qualities in people. Nevertheless, poverty does harm in varying degrees to its sufferers. The effects of poverty on the lives of people vary according to the duration of poverty, its intensity, personal characteristics, and the social cohesion of a community. Poverty might not be the sole cause of certain effects, though it often acts in concert with other causes. Poverty



often triggers behaviour by providing the spark that sets things off, or poverty exacerbates existing problems.

In what follows, I want to sketch a profile of the harm that poverty can do to people. I do not want to deny that poverty can have positive effects on people, that poor people often have creative ways of dealing with poverty, or that people can give deep meaning to their experience of poverty. Although some people suffer deeply from poverty, they are not necessarily victims. Some are victims, but others show resilience by making all kinds of plans in their efforts to survive (May 1998:18).

I also do not want to claim that all cases are similarly affected by the harms that poverty can do to people. I merely want to show the negative effects that poverty has had on South Africans of all races, creeds, languages, genders, ages, and origins. My purpose is not to assign blame or ascribe responsibility for the negative effects of poverty, but merely to show the possible consequences that poverty can have on its sufferers.

Who are the poor people? These people are often easy to recognise, especially when encountered at their home environment. Some people come from families that have been poor for generations. Other people may be recently impoverished, due to retrenchment or a natural disaster, such as a drought, flood, or volcanic outburst. Children are often a significant proportion of the poor, as poor people often have more children than the affluent members of society. Women are particularly vulnerable to poverty, as the oppression of a patriarchal society increases their risks of becoming poor.

Who amongst the more affluent are at risk of becoming poor? In a sense, everybody. A sudden natural disaster, like a flood, or a human disaster, like war, can impoverish the most affluent members of society. Unexpected loss of employment, sudden death, or serious illness of an economically active

member of a household can impoverish even rich people. More likely at risk of suffering from poverty are those people with few resources who cannot absorb the impact of sudden changes, like a downturn in the economy, retrenchment, death, disability, or illness of a member of the household.

How does poverty harm people's lives? In what follows I present common trends found amongst poor people in South Africa. I rely on comprehensive social science reports on the poverty of different groups in South Africa.

### *1.1 Poor people have difficulties satisfying their basic needs*

People who slip into poverty find it difficult to provide the basic necessities of life for themselves and their dependants. Poor people lack income or resources that can be used to buy or trade those commodities needed for physical survival. Some poor people are unemployed and therefore have no income. Others earn wages that do not cover the expenses for their basic needs (Wilson & Ramphela 1989: 54). A lack of income means that people do not have money to buy enough food. In this context, reliance on other sources of income is crucial. People with little or no income have their incomes supplemented by remittances sent by family members who work as migrants elsewhere, or by old age pensions granted to elderly relatives (Wilson & Ramphela 1989: 54). If these sources are not available, poor people may resort to borrowing money from family, friends, relatives, shop owners, or employees (May 1998b: 63). Women are more inclined to borrow money, as they are most in need and more often take responsibility for running the household. Borrowing money is a common practice that characterises the lives of many poor people (May 1998b: 63).

Without an adequate disposable income poor people are not able to acquire those commodities necessary for survival, or they might have greater difficulties gaining access to them. Food is a good example. Many poor children



do not have food to eat before leaving home for school in the mornings (Wilson and Ramphela 1989: 147). Children – and adults – who go without enough food, or whose family cannot afford food to ensure a healthy diet, suffer from malnutrition and all its associated effects, that cause poor performance at school and work.

Access to water is another example of the problems poor people face to satisfy their basic needs. The absence of a dependable, accessible, and affordable supply of water can incur heavy costs on poor people. These costs include money, time, health, and loss of economic opportunities. In urban areas where poor people do not have access to piped water, they often pay up to 30 times more for water than other citizens pay local councils (May 1998a: 217; Wilson and Ramphela 1989: 48). In some rural areas women spend 3 hours per day on average to fetch water. Carrying water over these long distances exposes their bodies to injury and places them at risk of assault and sexual harassment (Wilson and Ramphela 1989: 48). A further health risk is the lack of proper hygiene due to insufficient water available for washing themselves, their clothes and kitchen utensils. Poor health and loss of time contributes to the inability to utilise opportunities to generate income, just as the lack of water inhibits opportunities to grow food for own use or marketing purposes (May 1998a: 139).

People need sources of energy to provide light, warmth, and heat for cooking. Poor people often lack energy too. Sometimes they have access to electricity, but do not have enough income to pay for its sustained use (May 1998a: 148). Often electricity is not even available as an option. Alternative fuels, such as paraffin and wood are commonly used. These fuels are dangerous, as the risk of fire is always present. The risk of fire is exacerbated in areas of high density housing such as shanty towns, where housing is constructed from highly flammable materials, such as wood and plastic (May 1998a: 65). As a result of the high density of such areas, the absence of ac-

cess roads, and the general neglect of such areas by local councils, protection by fire brigades is not particularly effective. The use of wood as fuel has negative side-effects, especially in overpopulated areas. Women lose a lot of time collecting firewood, as well as being exposed to sexual assault (Wilson and Ramphele 1989: 44; May 1998b:65). Using wood as fuel in densely populated rural areas in a dry country with sparse vegetation leads to environmental degradation. In a short space of time many rural areas lose its vegetation, implying that poor people find it all the more difficult to find wood for use as fuel. At the same time the damage to the ecology of the area harms its agricultural productive capacities and destroys its aesthetic appeal as recreational areas (Wilson and Ramphele 1989: 44).

If poor people have difficulties in providing food, water, and sources of energy for their own use, then the provision of adequate housing will be an issue too. Overcrowding is common in poor homes, as is living in inadequately constructed houses that are often in desperate need of maintenance (May 1998a: 4; Wilson and Ramphele 1989: 124). Desperately poor migrant workers do not even rent a house or a room, but a bed in large communal rooms in hostels, which they share with wives and children. This bed is called "home" and dramatically presents the problems of overcrowding suffered by many poor people (Wilson and Ramphele 1989: 124; Ramphele 1992:). Couples have no privacy, children have no place to play, storage room is minimal, and it is uncomfortable to entertain visitors (Wilson and Ramphele 1989: 124).

Lack of sufficient income to provide for urgent needs affects poor people's ability to take proper care of their medical needs as well. Being unable to afford doctors in private practice, poor people have to rely on public health services. Poor people often do not use these services, as the location of the public health service might be too far a distance for them to travel, the reduced rates they have to pay might still be more than they can afford, and



the hours that public health services are open might not be accessible to working poor people (May 1998b: 60, 61). As a result many poor people also make use of traditional healers, herbalists, and self-medication (May 1998b: 118).

Local councils often neglect the residential areas of poor people, resulting in negative consequences. Services dealing with sanitation, refuse collection, roads, and water drainage are often inadequate and badly maintained (Wilson and Ramphele 1989: 132). Badly maintained, or no services of these kinds lead to environmental degradation in urban residential areas and health hazards for residents. Poor residential areas also often lack appropriate recreational facilities, like swimming pools, playgrounds for children, sports fields, as well as shopping centres, post offices, public telephones, and libraries (Wilson and Ramphele 1989: 132).

The inability of poor people to procure sufficient resources to satisfy their basic needs makes them vulnerable to some of life's changes (May 1998b: 3). Poor individuals, families, communities, or regions can be threatened by slowly occurring changes over a long term, such as drought or an economic recession. Drastic changes that occur suddenly, like floods, or the death of productive family members can have devastating effects too. Changes in the seasons occurring in normal annual cycles, like harvests and holidays can further increase poor people's vulnerabilities (May 1998b: 3). Persons' vulnerability depends on whether they can deal with the negative effects of such changes and whether they can recover from those effects (May 1998b: 3). Poor people's vulnerability is increased by their lack of resources and income. If their health is good and they have a decent education, they might have at least some resources to use in a recovery process. A further asset that some poor people might have available, is the strength of the social networks they have established prior to such changes and the extent to

which the people forming those networks have the capacity and willingness to assist them (May 1998b: 3).

### *1.2 Poverty affects people's bodies*

People without sufficient resources to provide adequately for their basic needs might easily suffer the consequences of an inadequate diet. Studies of poor people's diets confirm that although only a small percentage of the poor do not have enough food to eat, most of them cannot afford a healthy and balanced diet (Wilson and Ramphele 1989: 100; Murray 1932: 126). While some poor people can manage to include some proteins and vegetables in their daily food intake, very poor people's diets are severely deficient in basic foods needed for a healthy body (Wilson and Ramphele 1989: 100). Not all cases of inadequate diets are caused by a lack of resources; sometimes poor people are ignorant about what a proper diet ought to consist of (Murray 1932: 127).

Not enough food or an inadequate diet leads to malnutrition and its negative effects on the bodies of poor people. Researchers note how strikingly often they encounter poor health as a result of malnourishment among poor people (May 1998b: 118). Malnourished people are constantly tired, both physically and mentally (Murray 1932: 47). Their ability to concentrate, work productively, and resist disease is significantly reduced as a result of malnourishment (Murray 1932: 47). Many poor people, especially children, die from diseases that are triggered by malnourishment (Wilson and Ramphele 1989: 100).

There is no doubt about the links between inadequate food intake, malnutrition, and many of the diseases that poor people suffer from (Wilson and Ramphele 1989: 120). Gastro-enteritis is regarded as a poverty related illness. The incidence, prevalence, and severity of gastro-enteritis, especially



for children, are regarded as reasonably indicative of the socio-economic status of a community (Wilson and Ramphela 1989: 112). The correlation between the socio-economic status of a community and the incidence of deaths resulting from gastro-enteritis is striking in one South African study (Wilson and Ramphela 1989: 112). Gastro-enteritis was the most common cause of death in the Coloured community (176 per 100 000), the second most common cause in the black community (86 per 100 000), and almost insignificant in the case of the white community (4 per 100 000) (Wilson and Ramphela 1989: 112). Poverty related diseases are not the only source of harm to the bodies of poor people. Ill health can also be caused by dangerous or bad working conditions that often accompany low paying jobs (May 1998b: 118). The fumes from fossil fuels used for household energy requirements also contribute to deteriorating health (May 1998a: 35).

Some poor people are responsible for harming their own bodies. The widespread abuse of alcohol is a prime example. Alcohol abuse occurs amongst certain poor communities and men do so a lot more often than women. Alcohol abuse can easily lead to domestic or interpersonal violence or criminal behaviour (Terreblanche 1977: 64). The consequences of alcohol abuse, such as violence against vulnerable bodies and a drain on limited resources of poor households, are more devastating for poor people than for well-off people with more financial, social, or emotional assets available to deal with such behaviour (Wilson and Ramphela 1989: 159). Poor people often acknowledge their inability to deal with alcohol abuse, making it yet another example of their powerlessness to manage their lives satisfactorily (Wilson and Ramphela 1989: 159).

Harming others through interpersonal violence frequently occurs among poor people and not only as a result of the abuse of alcohol. Poor people suffer more from interpersonal violence than the rich. A national survey on people's experience of the most important crimes committed against them yielded

telling results (May 1998a: 130). Half of the poor people indicated assault as the most important crime they experienced, while only 10% of the rich had similar experiences. After assault, poor people thought child abuse and rape the most important crimes (May 1998a: 130). Again, these crimes are interpersonal violence through which frustration and dominance are expressed. The consequences of frequently occurring interpersonal violence are high levels of fear and distrust in a community that tears social bonds asunder, minimises communal co-operation, and diminishes space and opportunities for making full use of their human and productive capacities (May 1998a: 256—257).

Women and children are at special risk from interpersonal violence. Women in poor communities, according to their responses to a survey and judging by cases reported to the police services, suffer more from rape than women from more affluent areas (Wilson and Ramphela 1989: 153; May 1998a: 130). Violence against women in the domestic sphere results from conflicts over food or money and the risk of such violence increases with increasing poverty and male unemployment (May 1998a: 131). Poor women are often trapped in abusive relationships where they endure violence as they depend on the abusive male for money, food, and shelter (May 1998a: 131).

Children are often victims of interpersonal violence in poor communities (May 1998b: 18). Tired parents sometimes discipline children through cruel physical abuse, as they are too tired to take proper care of the children through more appropriate verbal communication (Terreblanche 1977: 76). At times poor adults vent their anger and release their negative emotions of failure, frustration, and powerlessness through abusive and violent behaviour towards children (Terreblanche 1977: 76). From a young age children's bodies bear the scars of the inability of adults to cope with too few resources.



### *1.3 Poverty harms people's mental well-being*

People without sufficient food to eat, who do not have enough water for household use, do not have an adequate income, are at risk of disease and violence, and who do difficult work for low wages experience considerably more stress than others without these problems. Researchers consistently find high levels of stress and feelings of frustration and anxiety among poor people (May 1998b: 50; May 1998a: 41). Worries about income, food, school fees, violence, keeping warm during winter, and the well-being of family members can negatively affect the mental state of poor people.

Besides stressful worries about everyday necessities and responsibilities, poor people often experience themselves as powerless in the face of life's adversities (Terreblanche 1977: 66; May 1998a: 41; Willcocks 1932: 69). Many poor people cannot visualise themselves as agents who can actively work and strive to change their circumstances. They have lost belief in their ability to influence events and live with a consciousness of their own powerlessness and inability to influence or change anything (Terreblanche 1977: 66; May 1998b: 50; Wilson and Ramphela 1989: 267). This attitude also concerns the events and history of their own lives. They experience life as something happening to them and not as though they are co-makers of their own history (Wilson and Ramphela 1989: 267). As a result poor people often show a lack of diligence, motivation, or initiative (Terreblanche 1977: 68; Willcocks 1932: 51).

Poor people with strong feelings of powerlessness tend to become dependent on other people, the state, or relief organisations to aid or take care of them (Willcocks 1932: 24, 172, 219). Some poor people in special circumstances, like farm workers, are wholly dependent on their employers for housing, water, and transport. In some cases they also depend on their employers for the provision of schools and entertainment (May 1998b: 26).

Giving aid to poor people in wrong ways can stifle initiative and self-reliance but reinforce dependency (Wilson and Ramphela 1989: 262; Willcocks 1932: 87). Wrong ways of aiding poor people can create an attitude that they deserve aid and have a right to it (Grosskopf 1932: 219).

Lack of essential resources for a decent life, feelings of powerlessness to do anything about it, and dependence on others lead poor people to develop a negative self-image, experience strong feelings of inferiority, and to resign themselves to their situation (Terreblanche 1977: 68, 70; Albertyn 1932: 19; Wilson and Ramphela 1989: 267). Negative views of themselves due to their lowly position compared to those of others in society, and their inability to change that position, give poor people feelings of fatalism, hopelessness, and resignation (Terreblanche 1977: 69; Albertyn 1932: 19; Wilson and Ramphela 1989: 267). They accept their situation and lose motivation or willingness to even attempt any changes.

In some cases of poverty that stretches over generations, a culture of poverty arises where several of the factors already mentioned combine to form a network of mutually reinforcing and interlocking barriers trapping people in poverty (Terreblanche 1977:79). In such cases poor people can become virtually immune to rehabilitation (Terreblanche 1977:79). For successful rehabilitation to break the stranglehold of this entrapping network, a comprehensive strategy must address their circumstances, as well as the harms to their mental well-being described above (Willcocks 1932: 176; Albertyn 1932: 98).

#### *1.4 Poverty damages people's relationships*

Poverty can have a devastating impact on human relationships. The dangerous mix of stress about inadequate resources for need satisfaction and the negative self-image formed from feelings of personal powerlessness can



wreak havoc on interpersonal and social relationships. Family (household) relationships suffer the most. Researchers frequently refer to fractured or unstable families with broken relationships where especially fathers and husbands are absent or children live apart from their parents (May 1998a: 4, 30; Terreblanche 1977: 67, 76). Rural men and women often migrate to urban centres of economic activity in order to find jobs, while leaving their children behind in the care of family members such as older children, grandparents, or uncles and aunts. Parents from urban areas send their children to family in rural areas for lack of space, time, and resources to take care of their children themselves (May 1998b: 78).

Patriarchal gender relations can become particularly strained when families suffer from poverty. In patriarchal marriages women take full responsibility for managing and executing household duties, while men make decisions concerning household income. Women's unpaid work of household maintenance take up most of their time and energy, leaving them exhausted. Consequently they are unable to take proper care of their children, to engage in activities to generate income, or to utilise opportunities for education or self-improvement (May 1998b: 80). Striking is the fact that even unemployed men with little to do will not assist women in domestic duties to ensure the maintenance or survival of the household (May 1998b: 102).

Conflicts between male and female partners concerning decision-making about resources are often resolved through violence or the threat thereof. Women challenge men's waste of precious resources on alcohol (wine and beer), tobacco, and other women (May 1998b: 48). Violence is an important means of control that men use against women that function as a deterrent for women to press their claims against men in cases of child support or an equitable division of household resources (May 1998b: 54). That many poor women have negative perceptions of men should thus come as no surprise. They perceive men as drains on their resources who expose them to the

risks of emotional, sexual, and violent abuse. Men are furthermore perceived as interfering with women's time and decision-making about household matters (May 1998b: 111).

The impact of poverty on families can disadvantage women in other ways as well. Risks of sexual abuse and pressures of sexual harassment often lead to teenage pregnancies and early marriages which rob women of valuable opportunities for education and put a heavy strain on limited resources available to a poor family (May 1998: 59). A further disadvantage for poor women comes from their own family's attitude towards her education. Poor families still often argue not to invest in the education of female children who are going to marry into another family. For them it makes more sense to invest in the male children who will generate income for the benefit of their own family (May 1998b: 59).

Children can suffer much from the consequences of poverty on poor families. They are often part of unstable and fractured families, or live apart from one or both their parents and raised by people other than their parents. Lack of resources within households imply that children are often malnourished, poorly dressed, and without money for educational requirements (May 1998a: 30).

The inability to continuously be a parent to one's children constitutes one form of neglect, besides others. When poor parents live with their children, they often do not have the energy to be involved in their children's lives to give spiritual, moral, emotional, or educational guidance (Terreblanche 1977: 76). Although the parents might be physically present, they are emotionally or psychologically absent from their children's lives. Often the only way they are involved is either by getting rid of their frustrations through their children or by enforcing overly strict and cruel discipline. Frustration can be expressed through various forms of abuse and discipline is often arbitrarily



enforced and accompanied with severe corporal punishment (Terreblanche 1977: 76).

Researchers use strong language to refer to these aspects of poor children's lives. Children in poor households are seen to be "massively vulnerable to violence of many kinds" and are said to face "appalling conditions" (May 1998a: 30). Although these conditions include deprivation of basic necessities of life, the abuse of poor children "in all forms, is pervasive" (May 1998b: 18). Abuse includes physical violence, sexual abuse, rape, and being forced into prostitution (May 1998a: 30). Besides being subject to violence from relatives, poor children are exposed to many negative experiences, such as violence against women and substance abuse. They cannot fail to observe such behaviour in the cramped conditions of overcrowded homes and residential areas. The impact of these negative experiences on their early childhood leaves scars that can hardly be erased in later years (Terreblanche 1977: 76).

Poor people are often isolated and alienated from their surrounding communities. One reason is that non-poor people often look down at poor people with contempt and show no sympathy towards them (Grosskopf 1932: 16). Non-poor people might feel ashamed of members of their own family, ethnic, linguistic, religious, or national group who have become very poor and consequently ignore them with resentment (Grosskopf 1932: 16). As a result poor people might be uncomfortable in the presence of non-poor members of society, unable to engage with them on a sociable level (May 1998b: 38).

Perhaps more important is the inability of poor people to join organisations or even self-help initiatives due to their lack of resources such as time, energy, and money (May 1998b: 109). Their social isolation increases and they lose their ability for social co-operation (Willcocks 1932: 37). This can be seen in the following example. The much celebrated African ethical value of

Ubuntu, which implies sharing whatever little you have available with others, has been "severely eroded" by poverty (May 1998b: 85). This erosion implies a deterioration of social and familial ties that could have functioned as valuable assets to decrease vulnerability to the devastation that poverty can cause.

Poor people often suffer from social illiteracy. Social illiteracy means not to have information about how your society works, not to know what means are available to you, and to be ignorant about ways to influence policy makers and public officials to do things for your benefit. This means that poor people are often ignorant about assistance they are entitled to request, nor do they know whom are in positions to provide them assistance. They are unaware of policies made for their benefit, they do not know how to let policies work for them, and they do not know how to influence a government to take their interests seriously (May 1998b: 124). As a result available aid, assistance, and knowledge do not reach them. The comfort that their situation is being addressed by governments or non-governmental organisations, albeit incompletely, never reaches them either.

### *1.5 Poverty erodes people's moral values*

Poverty erodes people's moral values as desperation to make a living gives them an incentive to be immoral. They are too poor to be moral. If you need to lie or steal for you and your dependants to survive hunger and desolation, can you afford not to? Poor people may argue that morally acceptable methods of earning a living did not work for them, therefore they are in a position where making a living through immoral means become a serious option (Willcocks 1932: 78). They do not have the material means to continue living a moral life (Terreblanche 1977: 70). In this way poverty becomes a cause of moral decay (Willcocks 1932: 78).



Moral decay starts by poor people becoming dishonest or telling lies in order to make a quick profit, to present a good impression to prospective employers, or to get aid from government or relief organisations (Willcocks 1932: 78). Moral decay goes further when poor people decide to enter the "underground economy" by engaging in illegal trading of goods like alcohol, diamonds, marijuana, or sex (Willcocks 1932: 83, 85; Wilson and Ramphela 1989: 156). Others make stealing a career and steal food, cars, household goods, farm animals, water, or become poachers that steal game (Wilson and Ramphela 1989: 156; Willcocks 1932: 83, 84).

Once people's moral decay starts by contravening fundamental moral values for the sake of their survival, the issue becomes whether they will stop in time before becoming serious criminals inflicting great harm to other people. If immoral behaviour leads to financial success it might become so much more difficult to return to a moral lifestyle rather than slipping deeper into immoral and later criminal behaviour. For this reason, poor communities are often beset by serious problems of crime, from petty stealing to assault, rape, and murder (Terreblanche 1977: 63). Crime is regarded as one of the "most tangible social consequences" of poverty (Wilson and Ramphela 1989: 152).

High levels of crime have devastating effects on poor communities. Poor people may lose some of the few material assets they have and so be further disempowered from engaging in entrepreneurial activities aimed at improving their lives (May 1998a: 256; May 1998b: 18). Their quality of life can be reduced by high levels of fear and distrust, which also erodes social cohesion and co-operation (May 1998a: 257). Criminal behaviour and lack of resources create insecurity among poor people. When these feelings of insecurity combine with the frustrations poor people experience in their desperate circumstances, they often lead to various forms of abuse and violent crimes. Significant to note that poor communities suffer more from interper-

sonal crimes, like assault, rape, and child abuse than from property crimes (May 1998a: 130). A consequence of a high crime rate is that investors, able of creating employment opportunities or improving facilities and services, avoid those areas.

### *1.6 Poor people have problems with employment*

A major cause of poverty is unemployment. Poor communities are often characterised by the virtual absence of people who are formally employed (May 1998: 75). To be unemployed does not necessarily imply that people are unskilled or uneducated. Although many poor people are unskilled, some have skills that are not in demand by the current economy. Even highly skilled people can become unemployed during times of economic recession.

However, this does not mean that all poor people are unemployed and unable to find suitable jobs. Many poor people are employed, but the nature of their jobs contribute to their poverty. Some employed people do not earn wages that are sufficient to provide for the needs of them and their dependants (May 1998a: 4; Wilson and Ramphela 1989: 54). These jobs often do not provide the security of permanent employment, as they might be employed on a seasonal or casual basis (May 1998b: 45). Often such jobs have no prospects of increased salaries or status attached to them (Terreblanche (1977: 79). Many of the inadequately paid jobs are done by poor people in dangerous conditions (Wilson and Ramphela 1989: 72). Such jobs involve heavy physical effort, carry health risks, and expose people to injuries or death (May 1998b: 80).

Poor people are often inadequately qualified to be considered for better jobs. One reason might be that they do not – and did not – value education as a means to land a better job (Willcocks 1932: 19). This might be a less common reason today than decades ago. Another reason that is becoming



less common is that some female children are denied an education as they are to marry into another family (May 1998b: 59). More common reasons for poor people's lack of skills are that they often find access to education difficult, as the costs involved are too high, the distance too far to travel, or the quality of facilities or teachers available to them inadequate (May 1998a: 34; Wilson and Ramphela 1989: 144).

### *1.7 Poor people are exposed to injustice and exploitation*

Poor people are often the victims of injustice and exploitation. If people are deprived of political rights and thus excluded from participation in government as a result of their group membership, those people stand a good chance of being impoverished through neglect.

People are often poor because governments at local, regional, and national levels deny them an equitable part of public resources. People thus impoverished are not part of the politicians' priorities for public spending. Excluded people's needs are ignored and they are allocated vastly unequal shares of government budgets. Vulnerable groups excluded from government receive less public services, benefits, and facilities than those provided to politically powerful groups. Favoured groups benefit from the bias in public expenditure at the cost of the excluded people, who are more and more impoverished through deliberate neglect.

Politics can impoverish people in other ways as well. Special interest groups, who aim to mobilise people already poor or at risk of becoming poor, can be banned or restricted. Such repressive measures weaken poor people's bargaining position to change the priority politicians assign them.

The business world often exploits poor people. Poor people are sometimes naive and unsophisticated consumers who are ignorant about the finer de-

tails of many kinds of business transactions. Many business people have exploited these weaknesses to trap poor people in bad debts or to let them incur monthly payments they cannot afford (Willcocks 1932: 40). Through these exploitative business practices naive consumers with very few financial resources often lose their purchased items, as well as the money already used as down payments.

In addition, some poor people are unwise consumers who go on spending sprees they cannot afford over the longer term. They waste precious resources on luxuries they do not need, while neglecting much needed basic necessities (Grosskopf 1932: 111). Through unwise spending – aided by unscrupulous business practices – many poor people further impoverish themselves. This kind of reckless spending often occurs when poor people's financial position suddenly improves, thus ruining chances of a true improvement of their quality of life (Willcocks 1932: 49).

## 2. Poverty threatens the norms of democratic societies

Besides the harm that poverty does to individual lives, it can also threaten the well-being of democratic societies. This is another reason why people should take poverty seriously, as harm to a society threatens the interests and well-being of all its members.

A high incidence of poverty threatens the moral foundations of democratic societies, as the fundamental values embodied in democratic societies seemingly commit members of those societies to address issues of poverty. I want to claim that failure to do something about poverty means neglecting, ignoring, or deliberately violating some fundamental values of democratic societies. This failure could have negative consequences for all involved.



The Australian philosopher, Peter Singer (1972, 1981, 1993) argues that non-poor people in rich First World countries have a moral obligation to address poverty in their own countries and in poor Third World countries. Failing to do so means that they are allowing desperately poor people to die through acts of omission. Allowing people to die while being able to prevent that without serious risk or harm to oneself violates the important democratic value of equal respect for individual persons.

Singer's appeal to moral notions widely accepted in democratic societies and the strong conclusion he draws from them have intuitive appeal. I want to argue like Singer that non-poor people violate and seriously threaten the moral values underlying democratic societies when they ignore the lot of poor people. Singer touches this issue briefly, but fails to explore it in depth. I want to take expand his approach by elaborating this argument for a moral obligation to eradicate poverty.

The nature of the supporting arguments for the moral position I am expounding conform to Charles Taylor's interpretation of practical arguments (cf. Taylor 1993). Taylor describes practical arguments as *ad hominem*, as they appeal to what the opponents are already committed to. In this case I want to appeal to the public values embodied in modern constitutional democracies that I assume citizens of those democracies are at least partially committed to. In my argument I hope to show that ignoring poverty is unconscionable on premises that democratic citizens accept. Not dealing appropriately with poverty is the result of errors based on confusions, impermissible exclusions, or lack of clarity on the meaning of public values (cf. Taylor 1993).

In the next section I want to discuss the normative foundations of modern constitutional democracies. Having explained what the fundamental moral values are, I want to show in the following section how poverty threatens

these normative foundations in various ways. In the third section I draw the conclusion that eradicating poverty is an urgent moral imperative for all citizens, organs of civil society, and governments of modern constitutional democracies.

### *2.1 The normative foundations of modern constitutional democracies*

When discussing the degree of moral responsibility that citizens, organs of civil society, and governments ought to take for the eradication of poverty, it makes sense to start the discussion by referring to the moral values embodied in the constitutions of modern democracies. These values were so important to citizens of modern democracies that they wrote those values into constitutions – foundational documents – that can only be changed by special majorities in the highest governing bodies. These values provide the moral framework within which democratic citizens enjoy their rights, exercise their freedoms, and live their lives. What do these values – that are foundational to democratic societies – imply for the phenomena of large numbers of people living in different degrees of poverty?

I want to argue that social and political institutions and their accompanying practices fashioned by the notions of equal political liberties and democratic rights for all mature members of a society are ultimately based on the principle of equal concern and respect for all people in the design and administration of the societal institutions under which they live (see Dworkin, 1978: 180; Rawls, 1975: 539, 548; Lötter 1993). This principle is best suited to capture the political wisdom of the Western democracies acquired through the political struggles and moral reflection of the past few centuries. Although varying interpretations of this principle can be given, the principle does place a sufficient limit on the kinds of institution compatible with it.



What does the principle of equal concern and respect imply for citizens in modern constitutional democracies? The equal respect part of the principle means the following. Equal respect is universally applicable to all citizens of a country. We can call this recognition respect, which means that kind of respect which we owe all persons simply because they are human beings (Darwall, 1977, pp. 38, 39, 45).

Bernard Williams (1971: 118) argues that to say all people (persons or individuals) are human reminds us of the following. These people belong anatomically to the species *homo sapiens*, they speak language, use tools, live in groups or societies, and they can interbreed despite belonging to different races. Furthermore, being human implies that they are alike in having capacities to feel physical or emotional pain. They also share the capacity to feel affection for other humans, as well as all the consequences of such affections, like the loss of loved ones or the frustrations of failed affection.

To owe other human beings recognition respect requires that we treat them in ways that do not neglect the characteristics mentioned above, nor overlook or disregard their possession of such characteristics (Williams 1971: 119). Recognition respect differs from respect based on merit or desert, where respect depends on the quality of people's performance in sport, the value of their intellectual contribution, or the beauty of their human characteristics.

To have equal recognition respect for every human being means that some things are due to them because they are human, regardless of desert, merit, race, moral or religious views, and lifestyle. In modern constitutional democracies the implications of equal respect for all citizens are taken to mean that all citizens are equally worthy of having the vote, for example, of owning personal property, or of getting married. People may be deprived of such things only if they lack the necessary abilities for possessing or doing them.

Equal respect implies that human beings can decide for themselves how they want to live their everyday lives, which kinds of relationships they want to engage in, and the values, norms, and beliefs they want to hold and live by. It also means the freedom to choose to which political party to belong and which political activities to join. As a result individuals can make their choices and live thereby, as long as they do not take away the freedom of others to do likewise. Finally, the principle of equal respect implies that each person should be represented in any governing body, such as local, regional, or national government.

Further implications of equal respect are that simply because another human being exists, we are wrong to treat that person in some ways and right to treat the person in other ways. For example, no person may inflict bodily injury on any person without having sufficient reasons, acceptable in a court of law, for doing so. Equal respect implies that individuals must be allowed to develop their own view of life, religion, culture, and politics, and live according to it. According one another equal respect allows people – who have equal dignity – the space and opportunity to be different from one another (see Taylor 1994: 38–44). Obviously, in being different they must be subject to the limitations set by democratic values.

What does equal concern mean as part of the principle of equal concern and respect? Equal concern for each individual means that each person has interests that ought to be considered equally. Thus, individual human beings have interests that matter to them and that they want to protect. Benn (1971) defines interests as conditions judged to be worthwhile that are necessary for a person's life, activities, or for making oneself worthy of respect. Examples of common human interests are as follows. Most people want to protect and sustain their own lives, have adequate shelter, undergo education, or engage in a career. An equal consideration of such interests implies that



each person's case must be heard and considered, and where relevant differences occur between cases, different treatment is justified, while in the absence of relevant differences the same treatment is required.

Where people's interests conflict, individuals must ground their claims to specialised treatment or their demands for privileged access according to criteria appropriate to the issue at hand. Arguments supporting claims and demands in one area of public life, such as job promotion, are not necessarily valid in another area of public life, such as access to medical care (cf. Benn 1971).

An alternative formulation of the core values underlying modern constitutional democracies can be found in the influential theory of justice formulated by John Rawls (1971). Rawls interprets his theory as an embodiment of the three core values that motivated the French Revolution, i.e., liberty, equality, and solidarity (fraternity) (cf. Rawls 1971: 106). Liberty is expressed in his first principle of justice that assigns typical liberal-democratic freedoms to citizens. Equality manifests in the same principle, as each citizen is assigned a set of basic liberties that are compatible with other citizens having a similar set. The second Rawlsian principle of justice also contains equality embodied in Rawls's version of fair equality of opportunity. Equality also manifests in the second principle, which intends to divide resources equally, unless an unequal division is to the benefit of the least advantaged. Rawls judges that the emphasis on the least advantaged in the difference principle expresses the fundamental meaning of solidarity, as citizens commit themselves through the difference principle to share one another's fate (Rawls 1971: 102). The basis on which they share one another's fate is that those advantaged by nature or social factors will only benefit "on terms that improve the situation of those who have lost out" (Rawls 1971: 101).

Rawls's formulation of the core values underlying modern constitutional democracies has a more restrictive content than the more open, process-orientated formulation of the principle of equal concern and respect. Dworkin, however, believes that the above two approaches are compatible. He has persuasively argued that the principle of equal concern and respect is the deep theory underlying the Rawlsian theory of justice (cf. Dworkin 1978: 180). Rawls (1975: 539, 548) himself uses a similar principle to justify his own theory. When he indicates the intended fairness of the original position between individuals he conceives them to be "moral persons with a right to equal respect and consideration in the design of their common institutions." Elsewhere he says that members of a well-ordered society view themselves as having "a right to equal respect and consideration in determining the principles by which the basic arrangements of their society are to be regulated" (Rawls 1985: 202).

Perhaps the most sophisticated understanding of the normative foundations of modern constitutional democracies can be found in Michael Walzer's book *Spheres of justice* (1983). Walzer interprets the function of a conception of justice in a modern constitutional democracy to create enabling conditions where mutual respect between citizens and self-respect by citizens become possible. His conception of justice for this goal is called justice as complex equality. He interprets the requirements of equality differently depending on the sphere of life under discussion. To treat citizens equally in the political sphere is something different from treating them equally in spheres of education, work, or the economy, for example.

Walzer's discussion of the provision of security and welfare as measures to eradicate poverty in a society sheds further light on his understanding of the requirements of equality. Walzer reinterprets the social contract as an agreement between citizens to decide collectively about the goods neces-



sary for their common life and how to provide them (Walzer, 1983, p. 65). There is no general formula applicable to all societies about this matter; citizens must argue about mutual provision of security and welfare to reach a common understanding on what to provide. The social contract is a moral bond connecting the strong and the weak. Citizens contract to redistribute their resources "in accordance with some shared understanding of their needs, subject to ongoing political determination in detail" (Walzer 1983: 82).

The crucial feature of the provision of security and welfare, so Walzer argues, is the interaction between provision and the political community (Walzer 1983: 64). A political community exists for members to provide one another with those goods for which they separated themselves from the rest of humanity and formed a community. But the process works the other way as well. Mutual provision exists in a political community for the sake of full membership in the community itself. Mutual provision must strengthen members to become full participants in communal life. Walzer argues that in states where citizens have any say about mutual provision, they will work out a pattern of "general and particular provisions designed to sustain and enhance a common culture" (Walzer 1983: 74). The function of the distribution of security and welfare is the recognition and sustenance of equality of membership (Walzer 1983: 84).

If participation in society as concrete realisation of equal citizenship is the goal, then the kind of aid provided to members of a society becomes important. Walzer points out that aid can be used to wound people, to keep them dependent, and to show them they are not considered to be full members of the society. Aid aiming to restore full membership must promote self-reliance and independence (Walzer 1983: 92–94). Help to poor people should aim to set them up on their own, which might require rehabilitation and retraining.

Walzer shows the conflict between foundational values of modern constitutional democracies and the existence of poverty. His theory demonstrates why the ideal of equality between citizens of modern constitutional democracies demands the eradication of poverty.

Whatever the exact formulation of the normative foundations of modern constitutional democracies – whether it be liberty, equality, and solidarity or the deeper principle of equal concern and respect – conflict will occur between the different values embodied in these formulations. Isaiah Berlin (1969) believes that ultimate values are sometimes irreconcilable and equally ultimate ends often collide as they are in perpetual rivalry with one another. Therefore we must make difficult choices in which some values or ends are sacrificed for the sake of others. We cannot eliminate the possibility of such conflict, for such conflict is a permanent characteristic of human life. Conflict between ultimate values cannot be solved by clear-cut solutions, Berlin (1969) argues, but rather by different choices involving hard sacrifices. This is particularly true of the sometimes conflicting demands of liberty, equality, and solidarity, as well as the often contrary claims based on equal respect or the equal consideration of interests.

The validity of my claim that the foundational values of modern constitutional democracies can be summarised in the principle of equal concern and respect finds support in the striking emphasis on equality in current moral theory. Amartya Sen (1992) argues that the major ethical theories concerned with public affairs are egalitarian in that they endorse equality in terms of one or more focal variables. Sen thinks ethical theories will not be plausible if they do not give equal consideration to everyone in at least some important part of a theory. Sen's explanation for the dominance of egalitarianism in the important spaces of contemporary ethical theories is that ethical reasoning requires to be credible from the viewpoint of other people. If poten-



tially all other people will be affected by a theory of public morality, they will not accept a theory that does not consider their interests equally with those of others in their society (Sen 1992). When moral theorists interpret the differences between people as inequalities, this means that those differences concern things that people value and thus compete for (Benn 1971). Sen's point shows the pervasiveness of ideas of equality and the equal consideration of everyone's interests in modern democracies.

Despite the strong emphasis on equality in modern constitutional democracies, full implementation of equal treatment for all citizens remains an elusive ideal. One reason is differences of opinion on where and how to treat citizens equally. The question, "Equality of what?" leads to strongly divergent answers, especially if limited resources cannot ensure all desirable kinds of equalities.

The second reason inhibiting full equality of citizens in modern constitutional democracies is the slow democratic process of consistently actualising equal individual rights (cf. Habermas 1994). Habermas points to the dialectic between *de jure* equality (equality under law and as embodied in the constitution) and *de facto* equality (equal treatment and equality in life circumstances). What the law and the constitution promise does not necessarily exist in practice. The actualisation of equality must be driven by social movements and political struggles where those affected by inequalities articulate their dissatisfaction and justify alternatives through public discussions (Habermas 1994).

Despite the difficulties involved in full implementation of the principle of equal concern and respect – judged to be the core of the normative foundations of modern constitutional democracies – it continues to function as normative ideal. How does poverty threaten this strong normative ideal that has

driven so many diverse developments in modern constitutional democracies? This is the topic of the next section.

Poverty threatens the normative foundations of modern constitutional democracies in several ways. In what follows, I will present different ways in which the prevalence of poverty in modern constitutional democracies can threaten their normative foundations.

## *2.2 Poverty violates the equal consideration of everyone's interest*

People suffering from poverty have inadequate resources to provide for their basic needs of food, clothing, shelter, and self-development. To ignore their interest in securing sufficient food, clothing, shelter, and opportunities for self-development to enable their physical survival as human beings, while others in society have an abundance of such means violates the principle of the equal consideration of each citizen's interests. To ignore these interests of poor people implies treating them as beings who do not possess human characteristics.

Someone might argue that such people are treated with equal respect as they do still possess equal political rights and are protected from state intervention in their private lives. Isaiah Berlin (1969) rightly argues that such a statement is to "mock their condition," as these poor people need medical help, food, or shelter before they can "understand or make use of an increase in their freedom" (Berlin 1969: 124). Berlin states that sophisticated forms of individual liberty, such as freedom of the press and freedom of contract do not concern those people who live in squalor and oppression – how could they, Berlin asks (1969), if they do not have enough food, adequate shelter, sufficient warmth, or a minimum degree of security?



Clearly, for anyone to watch people suffer – and even die – as a result of poverty while they are able to ameliorate the situation without harming themselves in any morally significant way is indeed the "end of all notions of human equality and respect for human life," as Singer (1981: 176) has put it so succinctly.

### *2.3 Poverty diminishes the value of democratic liberties*

In modern constitutional democracies all citizens have equal liberties. These liberties are expressed in rights to freedom of association, expression, religion, conscience, and so on. Poor people's lack of means and the burdens that result limit their capacity to advance their goals within the framework provided by a modern constitutional democracy (cf. Rawls 1971: 202; Berlin 1969). The value (or worth) of liberties possessed by non-poor people is far greater as a result of their greater wealth, means, and resulting authority available for achieving their aims (cf. Rawls 1971: 204).

In a democratic society with strong policies of redistribution – such as Rawls proposes – the value of liberty for poor people will be maximised. Whether the comfort of such redistributive policies suffices, depends on the causes of the inequalities of the value of liberties. Some inequalities of wealth result from the misery caused to some citizens by unjust social institutions and policies (cf. Berlin 1969). In such cases the lack of value of liberties experienced by poor people translates into a lack of liberty as a result of the incapacitating effect of unjust social arrangements (Berlin 1969).

When citizens are unable to make similar use of political liberties as a result of the unequal value those liberties have for them, there is a danger that economic inequalities can be translated into political inequalities. Drastically unequal distribution of economic resources easily manifests in the political arena where poor people cannot compete on equal terms with non-poor

people. The result of this unequal competition is that poor people's "needs are often overlooked, neglected, or very insufficiently provided for" (Gewirth 1984: 564). Poor people lack economic resources to use the print and electronic media, while their organisational infrastructure and skills are also severely hampered. As a result they lose their ability to speak for themselves so as to bring their needs and grievances to the attention of their governing bodies. They become unable to influence political decisions to favour their interests and views.

This powerlessness to use political processes convinces poor people that politics offer them no hopeful solutions for their problems (cf. Walzer 1983). This knowledge – gained from experience and passed on from one generation to the next – might lead poor people to "passivity, deference, and resentment" (Walzer 1983). Attitudes of fatalism and resignation can lead poor people to accept their situation as inevitable and to avoid or resist mobilisation to protest and change their living conditions.

#### *2.4 Poverty leads to powerlessness and exploitation*

That poverty can lead to political powerlessness became clear in the previous section. Another form of powerlessness comes from poor people's lack of ownership of property and shares in business. Ownership in property implies a kind of power that people have over property or business (cf. Walzer 1983). When you own something, you can give it away, keep it, exchange it, use it, or abuse it. Walzer shows that the power of ownership include power over other people as well, as an owner can often control parts of other people's lives through medium of property or business. Through lack of ownership of property or business poor people rarely exercise this kind of power, but rather experience power being exercised over their lives.



Poor people are furthermore often in weak bargaining positions when negotiating employment contracts. People in desperate situations often qualify only for dirty, dangerous, or gruelling work. Walzer points to the link between dirty work and disrespect for the people who do it. Walzer argues that hard work in a society will become more expensive if (i) the people hired to do it were treated as if they were fellow citizens with equal rights (Walzer 1983) and (ii) if communal provision for needs were adequate to prevent poor people from accepting work based on desperate exchanges as they have no other options.

Unemployed poor people who are so desperate to do any job that they will accept doing hard, dirty, or dangerous work for a mere pittance are clearly being exploited by employers. Taking advantage of people's desperate situation to increase profits and decrease costs can never be in accordance with the principle of equal respect and concern for every citizen. Again poverty leads to the violation of the fundamental values of modern constitutional democracies.

### *2.5 Poverty erodes loyalty and causes alienation*

If poor people experience a modern constitutional democracy as a place where their interests are neglected, their protest ignored, and their claims to equal citizenship insufficiently fulfilled, they can easily withdraw their loyalty from the normative foundations on which public institutions are grounded.

To sustain democratic political institutions over the longer term, citizens need to be loyal to their state. This loyalty to the normative foundations of a modern constitutional democracy – called constitutional patriotism by Habermas (1994) – comes from being politically integrated, but cannot be legally enforced. Ethical values and political rights that enable reliable and durable mutual co-operation that benefits everyone will motivate citizens to

use such values and rights as driving force for realising the goal of a society of free and equal citizens (Habermas 1994).

Walzer makes a similar argument. He points out that a political community exists for the sake of mutually providing for socially defined needs. Such mutual provision in turn strengthens membership of a political community (cf. Walzer 1983). Poverty breaks the cycle of mutual reinforcement between community and provision. Lack of provision for basic needs thus undermines the loyalty of citizens to their political community. For this reason Walzer describes poverty and prolonged unemployment as a kind of economic exile or punishment from which citizens must be saved, as their membership becomes ineffective.

The threat that poverty thus poses to the normative foundations of modern constitutional democracies in this case is to undermine the legitimacy of these values through causing alienation. Alienation in this case (cf. Taylor 1979:90) means that some poor citizens experience the institutions of modern constitutional democracies as being foreign to themselves. They cannot identify with the values underlying these institutions and they do not define their identities with reference to the dominant values and goals expressed in their societal institutions. As a result poor people lose faith in the efficacy of the entrenched public values of their society and become an outsider group who don't care for democracy anymore. Their support for democratic values gradually withers away. In this way the normative foundations of modern constitutional democracies are eroded.

## *2.6 Poverty can destabilise modern constitutional democracies*

Among the group of not so desperately poor people, feelings of relative deprivation might result from the lack of integration into society and the accompanying feelings of alienation. Whereas desperately poor people often re-



sign themselves to their miserable situation of poverty and fail to see any possibility of improvement, more moderately poor people often feel cheated of a more comfortable lifestyle. Sociologists describe these feelings in terms of relative deprivation.

Relative deprivation consists of cognitive and affective aspects (cf. Uys 1990: 57–70). The cognitive aspect refers to poor people's belief that they are being treated unfairly by society. They compare their personal situation with those of others in society and judge that the others have an unfair advantage. These people become convinced that their unequal socio-economic position results from injustice. In societies with strong universal norms – such as modern constitutional democracies – these beliefs are intensified, as poor people insist on sharing more equally in the benefits promised by universal norms. The affective aspects of relative deprivation refers to poor people feeling dissatisfied and aggrieved because of societal injustices against them.

A strong degree of relative deprivation amongst poor people does not necessarily translate into social unrest or political protest action, but the possibility is always there. Skilful politicians, trade unionists, or community leaders can capitalise on feelings of deprivation and convert them into a political campaign that might become destabilising. Resentment about unjust treatment by the social and political elite of society can easily spill over into a violent campaign in which destruction of property becomes commonplace, as property symbolises the injustice of wide gaps between rich and poor. Moreover, such resentment can spill over into widespread acceptance, legitimising, sanctioning, and condoning of crime as unlawful means of redress and redistribution. Although many citizens will not necessarily commit crimes themselves, their passive acceptance of crime and unwillingness to co-operate with law enforcement agencies can create Robin Hood "heroes" who steal from the rich to benefit the poor.

Despite the dangers of destabilisation, poor people's resistance and their political mobilisation to change their relative economic position can also be judged positively. To engage in such a struggle is a "denial of powerlessness, an acting out of citizenly virtue" (Walzer 1983). Why does Walzer describe poor people's protest thus? Walzer interprets the parties and movements responsible for such protest action as "breeding grounds of self-respecting citizens" (Walzer 1983). For Walzer citizens are self-respecting when they resist the violation of their rights. Citizens who deliberate with their fellow citizens, take responsibility for their views, and protest the violation of their rights are exercising political power in defence of their rights. Such citizens respect themselves through using some of their rights to oppose actions and policies that violate their other rights. They respect themselves by not allowing others to violate any of their rights through acts of commission or omission.

### *2.7 Poverty is justified by ideological distortions of normative foundations*

The existence and degree of poverty in violation of the normative foundations of modern constitutional democracies are justified by various ideologies. These ideologies are perversions and distortions of the normative foundations, as they select aspects of those foundations that suit the interests of a select group and ignore the rest. Economic inequalities are justified by using only some of the values generally accepted by citizens and embodied in the constitutions of modern constitutional democracies. Such justifications pretend to be in the interests of all citizens, but only serve to mask the interests of a privileged group. These ideological justifications of sectional interests present distorted versions of the normative foundations. They represent incomplete versions of these foundations, subtle disguises of the self-interest of a privileged group that masquerade as universal norms to benefit every citizen.



The process of selective appropriation of moral values with the aim of promoting the interests of a select group can be further explained by a modified version of a set of distinctions made by Ronald Dworkin (1986a: 181–191). The normative foundations embodied in the constitutions of modern democracies can be called a coherent political program that each generation interprets and actualises. Such a coherent political program consists of constitutive political positions, such as liberty or equality, that are valued for their own sake. Constitutive political positions do not necessarily cohere and might have contrary implications. As a result difficult choices must be made that will involve compromises and sacrifices. Strategies used as means to achieve constitutive political positions are called derivative positions.

Ideological distortions of the normative foundations of modern constitutional democracies occur at the level of both constitutive political positions and derivative positions. People identify stronger with some constitutive political positions and then design derivative positions to implement their one-sided choice. In a vibrant society with vigorous political debate and activity, one-sided choices made by one group can be off-set by similar one-sided choices made by other groups. However, in some societies the members of a dominant, powerful group are entrenched in influential positions where they can spread their ideas through the media to gain acceptance from those who are advantaged by them. When poor people are a powerless minority without the means to use channels of communication effectively, they might become trapped by the legitimising functions of such ideologies.

Peter Singer (1993: 32) uses America as an example of a society where an ideology of individualism "that simply encourages people to maximise personal advantage" reigns supreme. Individuals are in continual competition in pursuit of their self-interest. In such a society there is mutual hostility between individuals that undermines co-operation for collective goals. Singer

(1993:37) fails to see how a society that has elevated "acquisitive selfishness into its chief virtue" can be classified as having an ethical lifestyle. His judgement suggests that this ideology of individualism is difficult to reconcile with the normative foundations embedded in the American constitution.

### *2.8 Poverty violates the integrity of modern constitutional democracies*

Should citizens of modern constitutional democracies be worried about the harm that poverty does to the normative foundations of their societies? If so, why? I want to argue that citizens of modern constitutional democracies ought to be seriously concerned with the damage poverty does to the moral values underlying their public institutions. The reasons in support of my claim are as follows. Injustice harms not only its victims, but also those responsible for it. The harm to perpetrators of injustice that result from the injustice of poverty is the loss of integrity. The significance of this loss of integrity becomes clear in an uncomfortable analogy with criminal behaviour.

Plato argued that unjust people do not only injure their victims, but also their own souls (cf. Shklar 1990: 28–31). Through doing injustice, people destroy the parts of themselves constituted by moral values. Moral values form a defining element of any person's life, as morality forms an inescapable part of being human. A person's moral choices, concerned with what we ought to do or refrain from doing to other people and their interests, play a constitutive role in the definition of a personal identity. By acting against one's own moral values, a person erodes the legitimacy of those values and undermines one's own credibility. A similar argument applies to the way citizens of modern constitutional democracies deal with their moral values underlying the public institutions of their society.

Committing injustice causes loss of legitimacy to moral values and a lack of credibility for individuals and societies. Harm to legitimacy and credibility



can further be explained by the concept of a loss of moral integrity. Moral integrity has two meanings. One refers to the sense of wholeness or integration of a set of moral values. Do a set of moral values cohere and combine into a reasonable, coherent whole? If a person or society acts according to values contrary to some of those publicly professed by the person's or society's set of values, then the integrity of the set of values are undermined or violated. Moral integrity can also refer to the degree of correspondence between the values a person or society professes and the values expressed in the actual lives lived by that person or society. A high degree of correspondence between values professed and values lived is indicative of strong moral integrity, which is an admirable quality. Lack of correspondence between values and life leads to a loss of moral integrity, a condition frowned upon.

By consciously or unconsciously failing to act on those moral values by not making the eradication of poverty a moral imperative, citizens, organisations, and governments of modern constitutional democracies lose moral integrity which delegitimizes their moral values and makes them lose credibility as trustworthy associates. What makes the loss of moral integrity more serious is the uncomfortable analogy between citizens with a serious lack of moral integrity and ordinary criminals. Both groups violate some of the normative foundations of modern constitutional democracies, though criminals do it deliberately through acts of commission, while law abiding citizens may do it unwittingly through acts of omission. The uncomfortable similarity lies in the fact that both groups selectively obey only those moral values that protect their own interests, whereas they ignore those contrary to their own immediate selfish interests.

The harms that poverty does to the normative foundations of modern constitutional democracies are serious enough to threaten the short and long term interests of their citizens. Poverty harms a society through the negative

conditions that arise as a result of dissatisfaction leading to political conflict or civil unrest, the loss of the value and power of core moral values through a lack of legitimacy and the loss of personal moral integrity by a large group of citizens who act selfishly through justifying their interests ideologically at the expense of the most vulnerable in society.

The harms that poverty does to the normative foundations of modern constitutional democracies are serious enough to threaten the short and long term interests of their citizens.

### 3. Conclusion

There are good reasons why poverty is a serious moral issue that needs the serious attention of all people. In the first part of this chapter I show that poverty damages the lives of individuals. Poverty makes physical survival a serious issue, as poor people do not have the resources to satisfy their basic needs. Their bodies suffer through inadequate diets, lack of proper health care, alcohol abuse, and interpersonal violence. These harms and injuries to their bodies influence their mental well-being negatively. Some both suffer and engage in forms of emotional, criminal, and violent abuse. Poor people have added stress to the normal stresses of everyday life. Interpersonal, family, and communal relationships often suffer as a result. The moral values of poor people are often eroded as their circumstances make it difficult to keep to strict interpretations of moral values. School and job performances are often negatively influenced by all the factors mentioned above. Through lack of resources and the negative effects discussed above, poor people become vulnerable to life's gradual or sudden changes.

Poor people often suffer injustice and exploitation by governments, businesses, and employers. They thus often have negative self-images, experiencing themselves as inferior and powerless, unable to act as agents and



determine their own lives. These feelings are reinforced by the way non-poor people often treat them with contempt. The moral values of poor people are often eroded as their circumstances make it difficult to keep to the strict interpretations of such values.

In the second part of this chapter I argue that poverty can seriously threaten the norms of modern constitutional democracies. This argument proceeds in the following way. I specify equal concern and respect as the contents of the normative foundations of modern constitutional democracies. These values commit citizens to eradicate poverty. Failure to do so often let poor people die as a result of acts of omission, i.e., poor people die because their fellow citizens omit doing the morally right things. I then proceed to show various kinds of harm that poverty can do to these values. I argue that poverty violates the important value of the equal consideration of every person's interest. Poverty also diminishes the value of civil and political liberties for poor people, as they often don't have the time, energy, or resources to participate in politics. As a result poverty disempowers poor people and leaves them vulnerable to exploitation by the powerful people in society.

Poor people become alienated from society and lose their loyalty as [1] they do not feel that their interests are sufficiently protected, [2] their protest are being ignored, and [3] their claims to equal citizenship are insufficiently fulfilled. A loss of loyalty as a result of alienation means that poor people lose faith in the efficacy of liberal-democratic values and their support for these values withers away. More moderately poor people feel unfairly treated as they judge themselves to be relatively deprived from a more comfortable lifestyle. Their feelings of injustice and anger can turn into various forms of protest. As a result their society can become destabilised through social conflict.

The justification of the vast inequalities behind poverty is done through the selective use made of liberal democratic values, that often become ideological distortions of those values. The worst thing poverty does to modern constitutional democracies is to violate their integrity, as they do not simultaneously implement all their important values, but only those privileging the well-off group in society. The result of these harms to society is that citizens and the state lose their moral integrity. The moral values underlying modern constitutional democracies lose legitimacy and the citizens and government lose credibility.

The moral urgency of the devastating consequences of poverty on individuals and societies lies in the fact that poverty is something entirely remediable by human beings. Matters of public interest, like the suffering of poor citizens, that are remediable by human beings, are typically issues treated as matters of justice. Is poverty a matter of justice as well? This is the topic of the next chapter.

## 1. The Primacy of Justice

John Rawls affirms the primacy of justice in society. The powerful opening statement in Rawls's book states that justice is "the first virtue of social institutions, as truth is of systems of thought" (Rawls 1971: 3). Through this opening statement Rawls stresses the conviction that justice is primary in the moral evaluation of a society. Rawls (1971: 9) sees justice as providing the moral standard for assessing a society. Iris Marion Young (1990: 24) concurs with Rawls about justice as primary normative concept for judging social insti-