Women and the Myth of Poverty Alleviation

Abstract

The paper argues that if Caribbean governments continue to believe in the primacy of ‘economics’ over social development and social justice in solving issues of poverty then the whole issue of poverty alleviation/reduction/eradication will remain the myth it is for our people and for our women. For, in the final analysis, the question is: can there be justice in the framework of injustice?

Today, the Caribbean is not at peace with itself. While it has been argued that Caribbean societies are stable democracies, we are, nonetheless, in a state of what we prefer to call socio-political, economic and even religious turmoil, born of the absence of a clear vision of where we want to go as a people and a region. High levels of crime and violence, lacking financial resources, the inability of macroeconomic fundamentalism to solve economic problems and provide solutions, struggling economies, political ineptness, in some instances, a creeping authoritarianism in governance in political and other institutions, social chaos and turmoil, high levels of unemployment, declining health care, increase in chronic diseases and the continued presence and prevalence of HIV/AIDS, extreme nationalism in some instances, increase in domestic violence, increased violence against women, rising levels of poverty, particularly among women and girls, are just some of the worrying indicators that we could be a region facing imminent crisis. At the same time, we are witnessing the weakening of our regional institutions expressed in, for example, the potential demise of men’s West Indies cricket (the women are doing fine), what we have dubbed the balkanisation of the University of the West Indies, the weakening of the regional integration movement, CARICOM, and the Caribbean Single Market and Economy is shaping up to be a virtual non-starter. These indicators do not auger well for peace in a region striving for economic independence and bent on becoming ‘first world, having developed country status’ (however that is defined) by 2020 or 2025 or whatever year a/or any particular government chooses to aim for. It is a period which the conservative religious among us refer to as the ‘end times’ and the progressive secular, the time to end these times. It is a period in which we all should be searching for workable answers to stem and even reverse all these negative trends and developments which can only have a high social cost. But while some are searching, the predominant feeling is one of hopelessness and fatalism, and the question continues to be: where are we going?

Some of us look forward to the 1970s with both concern and hope while some of us are comfortable in the view that the search is over and globalisation is the new Redeemer, the new Saviour ‘to save that which was lost’ and to bring them into the fold of the happy global family. But despite this, we must recognise that the search is a dynamic one and one that not all members of the global family are happy since there are those of us who have an uneasy relationship, not with happy families, of course, but with happy families which live and thrive on the labour and labour power of those not considered worthy of fair remuneration and fair compensation.

We speak of the working women of our region and of the world for whom this year holds great significance for the working women of the world. It is a special year on their calendar and they
are now planning various activities to celebrate their achievements and to honour all those women past and present, who made such achievements possible. This is so because this year marks the 100th anniversary of the declaration of March 8 as International Women’s Day (IWD), first declared in 1910 with the first event to mark the occasion being held in 1911 when over one million women were united in their fight for women’s right to vote, to work and to end discrimination through rallies in Germany, Austria, Denmark and Switzerland. Originally called the International Working Women’s Day and first celebrated on March 19, IWD continues to be a celebration by all women, regardless of class, colour, race, culture and political hue, of the social, economic and political gains women have made locally or nationally, and even internationally, in their quest for ‘women’s rights’. This year, however, it is anticipated that there will be increased activity to celebrate a day introduced by the Socialist Party of America as a socialist political event, and first celebrated in Germany where the Marxist Social Democratic Party was to become Germany’s largest political party in the Reichstag (legislature of the German state under the Second and Third Reich, the former German state) after the 1912 elections. Ironic, isn’t it that for many of us, locally in the Caribbean and abroad, who are opposed to or have rejected ‘socialism’ and its principles as an alternative social order, or are opposed to Marxism or have distanced ourselves from both socialism and Marxism are still holding IWD, a product of socialist logic, in tight embrace. Perhaps, after all, there was something good in the ideas of socialism and Marxism and there is still need for a project of social justice, even if it is for women only: a project of social justice which goes beyond the simple age-old demand by women for “women’s equality” and now, in recent times, the demand for an amorphous “gender equality” since women are held together by a shared humanity, a shared bond and a common history of social exclusion. For, Ruth Leger Sivard, American economist, who conducted in 1985 a survey of 140 countries, tells us “what women have found to bind them together is a single thread that winds through all cultures. They share a sense of inequality of opportunity, the injustice of a traditionally imposed second place whether in the family, social, economic or political setting (cited in Schaffner Goldberg and Kremen, 1990, 2). One hundred years later, women as a social group which transcends national borders, are still demanding justice.

Therefore, it is my view that International Women’s Day 2011 should not be celebrated without purposeful thought and without reflection because the genesis of this women’s day is to be found in the poor social services and the social inequalities expressed in the harsh working conditions and increasing levels of poverty working women, working class women, faced at the turn of the 20th Century, a period when capitalism had taken root and was in its glory days in the U.S.A. and Europe and globalisation or imperialism (to use an outlawed word) in its early expression, was wrapping its tentacles around the countries of the South, tightening its hold on those, usually monocrop, economies, extracting every last drop of wealth and possible wealth to fuel their own growing economies. Writing on the level of poverty and the regular abandonment of children by mothers in the U.S.A. in this period, Jacob Riis had this to say.

[In a population of a million and a half, very nearly, if not quite, half a million persons were driven, or chose, to beg for food, or to accept it in charity....[T]he police report only 19 arrests for begging during the year 1889, but the real facts of the case are found under the heading vagrancy. In all, 2,633 persons were charged with this offence, 947 of them women.... (Riis, 1890, 243-8). In a score of years an army of twenty-five thousand of these forlorn little waifs have cried out from the streets of New York in arraignment of a Christian civilisation under the blessings of which the instinct of motherhood even was
smothered by poverty and want. Only the poor abandoned their children....They come in rags, a newspaper often the only wrap, semi-occasionally one in a clean slip with some evidence of loving care; a little slip of paper pinned on, perhaps, with some message as this I once read, in a woman's trembling hand: "Take care of Johnny for God's sake. I cannot. " In midwinter, when the poor shiver in their homes, and in the dog-days when the fierce heat and foul air of the tenements smother their babies by thousands, they are found, sometimes three and four in a night, in hallways, in areas and on doorsteps of the rich, with whose comfort in luxurious homes the wretched mother somehow connects her misery...Few outcast babies survive their desertion long. Murder is the true name of the mother's crime in eight cases out of ten. Of 508 babies received at the Randall's Island Hospital last year 333 died, 65.55 per cent. But of the 508 only 170 were picked up in the streets, and among these the mortality was much greater, probably nearer ninety per cent....The rest were born in hospitals. The high mortality among the foundlings is not to be marvelled at. The wonder is, rather, that any survive. (Riis, 1890, 187-188).

It was in this context that working women confronted capitalism, the capitalist state/ the established order, the status quo, challenging them for fundamental changes in their social, economic and political condition and circumstances.

We, as women and men at all levels of society, must, therefore, be more reflective in our women’s celebrations this year because the social, economic and political condition of women, and in some instances, cultural traditions, have not changed fundamentally since the declaration of IWD in 1911, precisely because capitalism with its ideology of patriarchy and its reservoir of poor, unemployed and unwaged workers has not changed its character and globalisation has only intensified that character. Women continue to face ideological and social marginalisation although they are central to the processes of production and reproduction. Women continue to hold most low paying jobs as they continue to populate national workforces and the international political economy as the spinal cord of a system which holds them in subjugation to their male counterparts for whom the benefits and rewards of society are reserved. Essentially, the unequal position of women, taken for granted for centuries, can and at the same time, cannot offer them the political and economic foundation for their own liberation or emancipation from the injustices of society. It can because such conditions of injustice can awaken our critical reason and deepen our social consciousness as seen in the resistance to capitalist exploitation by working women as noted above. But, at the same time capitalism cannot offer the political and economic foundation for women’s own liberation or emancipation from the injustices of society since that system of social and economic existence today, is governed and kept alive by a set of ideas which are incapable of creating social alternatives and which are unable to project a future for a liberated humankind. Bearing this dialectic in mind, let me hastily add that while all women face ideological and social marginalisation, as a social group, given a socialisation process which “tie the heifer and loose the bull” (Chevannes and Brown) and which favours a system of male authority which discriminates against women through its “social, political and economic institutions”, not all women are equally affected by societies’ economic and political policies. The horizontal (class) and the vertical (race) stratification of our societies guarantee this. (But, even among the different races, there is horizontal stratification e.g. poor Indians, poor whites). So, professional women, middle class women, upper middle class women, white women in some cases, and women of status are better off than their lower status counterparts who find themselves in the throes of poverty. As the Beijing Platform of Action notes:
Despite the progress made much remains to be done. While women have made significant advances in many societies, women’s concerns are still given second priority almost everywhere. Women face discrimination and marginalisation in subtle as well as in flagrant ways. Women do not share equally in the fruits of production. Women constitute 70 per cent of the world’s poor (p. 2).

Therefore, in our celebrations, while we recognise the gains women have made over the years (the right to vote for African-American women, the right to maternity leave, the right to equal pay for equal pay of equal status, the right to education) we must also stop and take note of those women who are still struggling to keep body and soul in equilibrium: the poor women among us: the instigators of International Women’s Day. It is these women, here in the Caribbean and abroad, who, in their disadvantaged position in society, also help us to understand that the woman question is about social justice as is the issue of poverty.

The prevailing literature indicates that women represent more than 50 per cent of the world’s population and poverty appears to exist among this cohort with pervasive tenacity. Responsible for this is a set of socio-economic discriminatory values, negative cultural traditions, political exclusion and a corresponding inadequate legal framework which have exacerbated the historical marginalisation of all women. Specifically, the existing economic crisis and structural adjustment programmes have sharpened the injustices being meted out to the woman population. Little wonder then that the world’s poorest are women.

**Women and Poverty**

The *Platform for Action and the Beijing Declaration* of 1995 draws our attention to the fact that “more than 1 billion people in the world today, the great majority of whom are women, live in unacceptable conditions of poverty, mostly in the developing countries…as mass poverty in many developing countries and as pockets of poverty amidst wealth in developed countries” (pp.37-38). This social phenomenon has led to what scholars of women’s and feminist studies and activists have dubbed, “the feminisation of poverty” which has become a significant problem and over the years, the number of women living in poverty far exceeds that of men, particularly in our region of the world. The Fourth World Conference on Women which produced the *Platform for Action the Beijing Declaration*, further notes that poverty, “a complex multidimensional problem has various causes, among them structure of society, gender disparities in economic power sharing and “the failure to adequately mainstream a gender perspective in all economic analysis and planning to address the structural causes of poverty” (p. 39), absence and/or lack of economic opportunities, lack or limited access to education and training for women, insensitive social welfare systems and macroeconomic policies which do not address women’s stressful and burdensome condition as players in the private and public domain and which do not consider the differential impact of such macroeconomic policies on women.

On the basis of this analysis, *The Platform for Action and the Beijing Declaration* indicates that the women of the international feminist and women’s movement are convinced that governments’ approach can solve, to a large extent, the issue of poverty among women. To this end, they recommend strategic objectives that can be adopted by various and all governments; that governments (a) review, adopt and maintain macroeconomic policies and development
strategies that address the needs and efforts of women in poverty; (b) revise laws and administrative practices to ensure women’s equal rights and access to economic resources; (c) provide women with access to savings and credit mechanisms and institutions; and (d) develop gender-based methodologies and conduct research to address the feminisation of poverty (pp.40-42).

Nothing wrong with these recommendations, but 15 years later, the condition of women have virtually remained the same, and in fact, in some cases, has got worse over the years, increasing exponentially. We do admit here that it is difficult to compile data on poverty and statistics on women's prevalence among the poor are hard to gather in many countries, and we also admit that different countries use different measures for levels of poverty. But the available literature indicates that one thing is common is that their indicators, usually economic in nature, show that “the number of people living in poverty in the United States of America, for example, keeps on increasing every year with 1.7 million more people in poverty in 2002 than in 2001, i.e., 34.6 million people, including 12.1 million children. In 2002, there were three million more poor people than in 2000 and prominent among this group were single mothers who headed some 50 per cent of the families living in poverty. The poverty rate for female-headed households was three times that of all households and one-fifth of all homes headed by working single mothers slid below the poverty line. The picture in 2009 was even more daunting. According to the Census Bureau, poverty stood at 15.7 per cent or 47.8 million people, people over 65 years of age being the largest cohort. And, Shukor Rahman (2000) of the World Food Programme has lamented that "every day 11,000 children die of hunger around the world while 200 million suffer from malnutrition and a lack of protein and calories. More than 800 million people are suffering from hunger in the world, and some 70 percent of them are women and children."^2

In the case of Canada with its wide range of generous social welfare programmes, the financial condition of women has been an area of grave concern by a number of organisations including the National Council of Welfare, the Canadian Research Institute for the Advancement of Women, the Canadian Council on Social Development, and the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives and the Canadian Association of Social Workers (CASW) which has an interest in the improvement of women’s condition and circumstances. In its first in a series of reports, on social issues and social policies in Canada, the Canadian Association of Social Workers decided, in 2003, to focus on women’s state of poverty through establishing a relationship between income and poverty, mainly because many social workers across that country work with poor women and have an interest in seeing their condition and concerns addressed. In its summary, the report noted the following.

- Income disparities between women and men persist. According to Census 2000, the average annual pre-tax income of women from all sources including government transfers was $22,885, or 62% that of men.

- Women continue to be among the poorest of the poor in Canada. They make up a disproportionate share of the population with low incomes – 2.4 million in 2001 compared to 1.9 million men.

- Family status has a profound effect on poverty. In 2001, 42% of unattached women ages 18 to 64 lived in poverty compared to 12% in families.

- Female lone-parent families have by far the lowest average total incomes among families in Canada.
• In terms of the income which women receive from earnings, the ratio of women’s earnings to men has changed little in the last ten years. A key reason for difference between women’s and men’s earnings, when comparison is based on average annual earnings, is related to the hours worked.

• While the ratio of employment income of immigrant women to immigrant men seems to be similar to other women in Canada, a larger percentage of immigrant women are without employment income.

• The average employment income of visible minority women and men is lower than other women and men but the gap between visible minority women and men is not as wide.

• While the incidence of poverty among women declined from 18% in 1992 to 16% in 2001, the depth of poverty (i.e., the gap between poverty line and the average income of women) remained quite deep and in some cases worsened. The gap for non-elderly unattached women in 1992 was $8094. The gap in 2001 was $8546.

• After tax income marginally improves the level of income for low income individuals and moderates the incidence as well as the depth of poverty. It does not fundamentally affect the relative position of women who remain among the poorest of the poor.3

In the case of the Caribbean, the situation is the same. St. Vincent and the Grenadines Bureau of Women’s Affairs reported recently that “for the majority of women, there was no significant shift in their conditions of life. Of the approximately 37 percent of Vincentians who fall below the poverty line, “a great number…are women” who live in deplorable conditions of poverty despite the government’s ‘war on poverty’ (“Status of Women’s Report of St. Vincent and the Grenadines”, 2002, 5). They state that poverty reduction measures which were, significantly, not gender specific did not address the crux of the social and economic situation. It was concluded, then, in the government’s “Interim Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper” that “marked gender disparities exist reflecting the different roles, responsibilities and options available to men and women which will unless addressed comprehensively, continue to be a significant restraint on progress in St. Vincent and the Grenadines” (cited in “Status of Women’s Report, 2002, 3).

And for Barbados: a report by Aubrey Browne to the UNSD Workshop on Poverty Statistics in Latin America and the Caribbean, (May 10-13, 2004 (Rio de Janeiro, Brasil) under the title “Barbados’ Experience with Poverty Surveys”, indicated that most poor households were headed by females, almost 59%; single parents headed most of the poor households, 57.3%; high unemployment rates were closely associated with low income, a characteristic of the poor population; the mean unemployment rate within poor households was almost two and a half times that of the non-poor ones and unemployment among females, especially the young, was closely linked to poverty; and being single contributed to 53.6% of poverty intensity in Barbados which was also closely associated with women.

Given these developments, we can, in the context of the recommendations of the Fourth World Conference on Women, ask the following questions: Is it that the recommendations were ill-conceived or are they unworkable or are there other factors at work that we are missing?

To answer these questions, we will now briefly analyse the issue of poverty in our region of the
world, the countries of the South: Caribbean, Latin America, Africa and Asia, to see what implications programmes of poverty alleviation, also known as poverty eradication or poverty reduction programmes, have for our women, noting that the issue of ‘development/underdevelopment’ is the context within which poverty and related issues are often discussed, and the solutions to poverty sought within that socio-political and economic framework. In so doing, we recognise that poverty, as a social, economic, political, and even a psychological state, has its own context and frame of reference.

The Phenomenon of Poverty

Poverty in the ‘Third World’ is not a 20th Century phenomenon. Nor is it a 21st Century phenomenon. It is an age old socio-economic and political issue which has its roots in colonialism, slavery and dependent capitalism which, by its very nature, creates social inequalities and a situation of social injustice, marginalising particular social groups and social classes. Oft times, poverty, defined here as social disparities, social exclusion, material deprivation and the skewed distribution of political power, is understood as a consequence of ‘underdevelopment’. For us, the basis of this ‘underdevelopment’ is seen to be the inability or unwillingness of governments to transform political independence into economic and social independence, and, in keeping with this, the reluctance to transfigure the structures and institutions which create and perpetuate both ‘relative’ and ‘absolute’ poverty. While this may be so, the popular or dominant thinking in many quarters is that ‘underdevelopment’ is understood as the absence of ‘development’ which is understood as an economic phenomenon. This ‘development’, they define in terms of economic growth through trade, international aid, foreign direct investment, local private sector growth, and technological advance, all in the context of the advance of industrialised societies. Their solution then to (‘underdevelopment’) and the issue of poverty rests on the economic pillars in societies which have, over the years, introduced and implemented poverty alleviation/reduction/eradication programmes intended to confront poverty in its various expressions. However, the view that growth, trade, aid and investment can alleviate, reduce or eradicate poverty, is undermined by the fact that there is historical evidence to show that in instances where ‘development’ or growth has occurred, poverty has worsened here in the Caribbean and farther afield. This is so because the development model being hotly pursued by most countries of the South is a ‘top-down’ one which is incapable of dealing with major social problems, and so produces in the process, growing poverty, discontent and disillusionment among the majority classes and women as a particular social group who, themselves, are distanced or isolated from the centres of power. This is so because the benefits of this model of development instead of trickling down to those most in need, settles at the level of the local (or international) elites and their coordinates. We note then that those countries whose uncritical acceptance of the capitalist path of development coupled with their integration into the globalisation process, have allowed us to ‘develop’ into poverty and are now desperately seeking to ‘develop’ out of it through poverty alleviation/reduction and even eradication programmes.

Since the 1990s, the prevalence of poverty, its causes, and solutions, caught the attention, not just of national governments, but also of international players which/who have expressed concern about this tenacious social ill. For example, the supranational United Nations discovered in 1995 that ‘Third World’ poverty, which has been with us for centuries, was really a significant social ill. The 1995 UN Summit on Social Development aimed to reduce the proportion of people living in extreme poverty by half by 2015. And, the United Nations Development
Programme (UNDP) has at the core of its mission, the elimination of poverty and meeting the goal of the Social Summit. This UN organisation, in its contribution to the elimination of poverty monitors this social scourge through its Human Development Reports (which are themselves flawed in terms of method, methodology and mechanisms which generate poverty). But, it submits that the solution to poverty lies in the “right combination” of global and national policies and “sustained political will”, equitable growth accompanied by policies and strategies to meet the health and education needs of the poor. Vague though this solution may be, The UNDP nonetheless, in its eager moments, assists the World Bank in crafting Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers to accompany international debt measures, debts which were created, in the first place and in part, by the Bank itself. Nonetheless, the World Bank, for its part, has tied international lending to solving the issue of poverty. In what should be seen as a paradoxical move, the Bank in September 1999, supported poverty reduction strategies in countries of the ‘developing’ world. In this regard, they took the decision that locally-owned participatory poverty reduction strategies should form the basis for all their concession lending and debt relief. Such strategies, they argue, should be country-driven and participatory, (including the private sector) partnership-oriented (with bilateral and multilateral aid donors), result-oriented and exhibit a comprehensive understanding of the different dimensions of poverty within the context of a long-term agenda for poverty reduction. In fact, as the World Bank, which ironically funds all poverty alleviation/reduction programmes, jumps on the “poverty” wagon, Samir Amin points out that this lender agency, despite its rhetoric on poverty reduction, has no other function but to operate as a kind of “ministry of propaganda” for Washington with its treatises on “democracy”, “good governance” and “reduction of poverty”. But, be that as it may, the issue of poverty seems to be taking centre stage in the policies of the Bank as they relate to the borrowing requirements for ‘underdeveloped’ countries. Given the history of the Bank, perhaps, one could say that this attention to poverty is less out of conscience and more out of a move to increase their profits and influence on ‘Third World’ governments and to appear altruistic in the face of their anti-social conditionality on borrowing countries in the tradition of its twin, the International Monetary Fund (which we discuss later). In the case of Sudan, for example, World Bank structural adjustment programmes, introduced in 1981, have negatively affected all areas of social life of the Sudanese people from education to small farming in a country where agriculture continues to be the most important economic sector. It is a sector which employs 80 percent of the workforce. As a matter of fact, the impoverishment of the Sudanese people has been attributed, in part, to the World Bank’s social and economic policies of adjustment. Other factors include militarisation of the economy and long-standing conflicts.

For these thinkers, poverty is first and foremost an economic issue, and must be addressed in economic terms. For them, poverty results from ‘underdevelopment’ occasioned by mismanagement of the economy, bad governance, lack of economic growth, poor distribution of resources, poor or a lack of social services, lack of foreign investment and the absence of international aid from rich donor countries of the North. This view, for example, coincides well with that of Director of the Earth Institute, Colombia University and the UN Millennium, noted economist, Jeffrey Sachs. Sachs who also understands ‘development’ and ‘underdevelopment’ in the context of economic liberalism offers his own prescription. Poverty, he states, can be eliminated by 2025, if clear targets are set to meet peoples’ basic needs in the social services: health, education, sanitation, food production, water and other areas critical to one’s existence. In addition, he contends that if international donors are generous enough to provide development
assistance to the tune of 0.7 per cent of their Gross National Product, then the financial gaps which plague countries of the South would be bridged and poverty would see its last days in countries where large numbers of people have been historically poor and disadvantaged.

No wonder then that since the 1980s, the issue of poverty has been preoccupying governments from the Caribbean and Latin America to Africa and Asia. In Nepal, Cambodia, Kenya, South Africa, Ghana, India, Pakistan, Barbados, St. Vincent and the Grenadines, Guyana, Jamaica, Argentina and Peru for example, the issue is the same: combating poverty and achieving prosperity for the poor, particularly the “extreme poor”. As a result, there is an ongoing discourse on poverty and the need to alleviate/reduce it and, if possible, eradicate it. Both state and non-state actors, political and civil society are involved in the discourse. At the level of non-state actors and civil society, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) feel that poverty can be alleviated or reduced through income-generating projects. With aid from international donors such as Oxfam, Christian Aid, HIVOS, they have implemented isolated income-generating projects to ease the burden on the poor, including women, in particular communities with varying success. Such projects do not actually attack the roots of poverty because of their localised nature and their superficial understanding of the causes and roots of poverty. In a number of cases, certainly in the Caribbean, such projects have basically frittered away. In fact, in the Caribbean, the developmental NGO sector is now virtually non-existent.

At the level of political society, governments have introduced programmes of poverty alleviation/reduction, based mainly on the establishment of income-generating projects and various credit schemes, to address the plight of the poor. In most cases, these are one-off projects which do not have the desired results. For example, in Pakistan, despite the implementation of a poverty alleviation programme, poverty rose from 20 per cent to 33 per cent in 2002-2003. In the case of Barbados, where there is a Ministry of Social Transformation and a government “poverty eradication consultant”, the government, circa the late 1990s, allocated BDS$1m. to an underprivileged community to alleviate poverty. Today, the community is still poor, still marginalised and socially stigmatised, and still underprivileged. Further, in a television interview on June 20, 2007, Deputy Prime Minister of St. Lucia, Stephen King, expressed grave concern that the country’s economic growth of 4.5 percent was not being transformed into ‘development’. For, in spite of the country’s positive growth over the years, poverty had “worsened”. Note that in St. Lucia, there is also a World Bank-funded poverty eradication programme in place. In the case of India, one of the world’s fastest growing economies, not much positive can be said about its efforts at poverty alleviation. And, in March of 2007, Guyana’s president opened the summit of Latin American leaders with an appeal to reverse the “abysmal” record on poverty and social inequality in the region where upwards of 50 million people live in squalor and lacked basic social services, suffering also from hunger and access to food.

Many countries in the Caribbean and Latin America have achieved significant growth over the years, Chile, Barbados, Trinidad and Tobago and Brazil, to name a few, but these countries have not been able to solve their problem of poverty. According to an ECLAC report, the Caribbean and Latin American region had an overall economic growth rate of five percent for 2006, and for 2007, growth is expected to be about 4.5 percent. Specifically, Caribbean countries are expected to grow by 6.3 percent, South America by 5.4 and Mexico and Central America by 4.1 percent.
In the case of individual countries, for example, Chile has experienced growth rates of five to seven percent over the last years and, in fact, had the highest nominal Gross Domestic Product (GDP) per capita in Latin America in 2006; Barbados’ growth rates have averaged between three to five percent since 1993; Trinidad and Tobago had a growth rate of 12 percent in 2006 and Brazil’s growth rate in 2006 was four percent. Despite these glowing figures, the ‘zinc fences’ (a characteristic of poor communities in some Caribbean countries) are not coming down, and the barrios and low and no income communities in Latin America are not getting less: note that in Chile where poverty is reported to have declined between 2000 and 2003, 9.6 percent live on two dollars per day; in Barbados, those living below the poverty line in 2003 was 13.9 percent; in Trinidad and Tobago it is 21.1 percent and in Brazil, those living below the national poverty line comprised 30 percent of the population. Significantly in Brazil, the data has shown that despite its economic growth over the years, there was an overall increase in poverty between 2001 and 2003, but “improvements” were seen in the country’s rural areas. In the cases of Argentina and Mexico, poverty “declined” between 2002 and 2004: in Argentina, poverty declined, not in rural areas but in urban areas by 16.0 percentage points and indigence by 9.8 points; Mexico showed “a further reduction” in poverty between 2002 and 2004. Despite ECLAC’s glimmer of optimism, in the cases of Chile, Argentina and Mexico, Head of the Organisation of American States (OAS) in his presentation at the 2007 Summit of Latin American leaders (mentioned above) stated that leaders of all political and ideological persuasions need to work towards strengthening democracy in their countries as they all faced the common challenge of reducing poverty and corruption.

In other cases in the Caribbean where many people are living below the poverty line, the figures, according to a 1999 survey are as follows: Antigua and Barbuda 12 percent; Belize 35 percent; Dominica 33 percent; Grenada 20 percent; Guyana 43 percent; Jamaica 32 percent; St. Kitts/Nevis 15 percent; Saint Lucia, 25 percent; St. Vincent and the Grenadines 17 percent. Jamaica has, however, reported in 2005 that since 1999, there has been a decline in the incidence of poverty which has shown a consistent downward trend since 1992. In 2005, the figure stood at 19 percent which is roughly the same today. Overall, however, poverty remains an ongoing challenge, despite significant improvements in social and economic indicators. In fact, some 25 percent of the region’s people subsist below nationally defined poverty levels. But while we can say that there have been improvements in the condition of the poor, although we are not clear on the measurements, standards and goals of poverty alleviation/reduction programmes, poverty still remains at unacceptable levels and, therefore, on national agendas as a social issue which will not go away.

That poverty continues to be a challenge in Caribbean and Latin American societies is not a mystery. As open, dependent, export-propelled and import-oriented economies, particularly in the case of the Caribbean, their integration into global capitalism through unequal terms of trade, and the unbalanced transfer of capital, technology, finance and aid, not only creates balance of payments problems, but also continue to benefit the local elites at the expense of the poor. For example, the structural adjustment programmes of the IMF and the World Bank and the various monetary and fiscal measures they force on the heavily indebted governments of the Caribbean and Latin America have created ‘new’ poverty while exacerbating the ‘old’. In real terms, structural adjustment pushes the poor towards greater pauperisation and dispensability. In Jamaica, for example, the IMF’s standard prescription for all countries experiencing balance of
payments problems resulted in a high international debt, the deterioration of health services and other social services, a devaluation of the dollar, increase in inflation rates, policies of liberalization of trade, cutbacks in the education budget, a drop in export earnings, a removal of food and agricultural subsidies, high levels of unemployment, shrinking of the local agricultural sector and an opening of the economy to foreign capital. This is not specific to the Caribbean and Latin America. Cheryl Payer in her classic piece, *The Debt Trap: The International Monetary Fund and the Third World* (1974) presents an expose on the system of aid and credit in which the IMF dictates internal policies in borrowing nations, frustrating the efforts of these ‘developing’ countries to gain control over their own economies. Based on case studies of Brazil, the Philippines, India and Indonesia, Payer discusses the foreign exchange needs and resources of these countries, their balance of payments crises and the adverse socio-economic consequences of IMF intervention which can also assume a political role. The IMF, she concludes, is really an obstacle to independent national growth and development.

In the case of Grenada, aid meant the divestment of all government-owned enterprises, high levels of unemployment and a discontinuation of all social programmes. The situation is no different in Latin America as Hayter acknowledges. Teresa Hayter in her early piece, *Aid as Imperialism* (1971) draws our attention to the offer of foreign ‘aid’ and its negative implications for countries of Latin America and the Caribbean. According to Hayter, international lending agencies such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) the World Bank (WB) and the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) operate against the best economic, financial and social interests of the borrower country since this ‘aid’ has never been “an unconditional transfer of resources”. It comes with strings attached. ‘Aid’, she argues, operates in the interest of the donor countries which milk the financial resources of the less developed countries. For example, the money borrowed must be spent in the donor countries to acquire goods and services and to pay high salaries to their “consultants” and “experts”. Inherent, then, in the relationship between debtor and creditor is ‘underdeveloped’ economies, and the consequent unacceptable levels of poverty at both the national and personal levels. This view is not out of keeping with that of Andre Gunder Frank, who in his *Capitalism and Underdevelopment in Latin America* (1969) explains the roots of ‘underdevelopment’ and ‘development,’ (which go beyond simple economics) and poverty between and within nations.

We also get a view from the ‘other side’. Graham Hancock, in his piece, *Lords of Poverty* (1997) points out that the World Bank, like all other lending/aid institutions (except, for example, private donor agencies like Oxfam) mouth meaningless rhetoric about the sorry condition of the South’s poor. Hancock, in his in depth study of official aid organisations and lending agencies, concluded that development is big business for these organisations and agencies, which include the World Bank In this respect, he notes that despite the expenditure of massive sums of money, “hundreds of billions of dollars” (to ‘Third World’ countries) there is little evidence to prove that the poor in these countries have actually benefited. Instead, international aid, he continues, pays the large salaries and underwrites the lifestyles of privilege enjoyed by the international civil servants, ‘development experts’ consultants and the many and varied “freeloaders” who staff these aid agencies.

Essentially, then, there is really no positive or direct correlation between economic growth and poverty alleviation/reduction or even eradication. What seems to be the existing situation is that
there is more of an inverse relationship between the two.

However, while we acknowledge the views of proponents of poverty alleviation/reduction, we argue that however well-intentioned governments are, poverty alleviation programmes will fail not because they are ill-conceived, misconceived, badly implemented, misdirected or conceptually flawed, but because the roots of poverty and its causes have not been fundamentally attacked in what could be seen as a skirmish against poverty. Our view in this regard is that poverty in the Caribbean and the rest of the ‘Third World’ persists, not because some governments do not care, but because its persistence is guaranteed through the social and economic structure of these societies and their corresponding politics and institutions which perpetuate that social ill, regardless of policies, programmes and projects intended to satisfy peoples basic needs. That poverty is not simply an economic issue and that ridding society of this social ill or alleviating it is not simply a matter of economics. In our view, poverty is a historical legacy and a consequence of the crises and contradictions of local and global capitalism. Even with history aside, ‘development’, in our context, has never really been about alleviating, reducing or eradicating poverty. Our emphasis has been on catching up with the ‘developed’ world through international ‘aid,’ the transfer of capital, technological advancement and economic growth which in and of itself, cannot (and has not) ensure (ensured) the last days of poverty as the literature seems to suggest. In our view, poverty alleviation, or reduction and even eradication is just another piece of liberal capitalist rhetoric meant to assuage the people’s feelings of social, economic and political inadequacy, discontent with exclusion, deprivation and powerlessness and the injustice they breed.

Furthermore, in all of this, growing levels of poverty, whether defined as ‘absolute’ or ‘relative’ or as ‘social exclusion’, or understood as an economic phenomenon, present a challenge for the ambitious governments. For whether they believe it or not, poverty is a question of social justice. Its presence and prevalence, therefore, signifies their unwillingness or inability to distribute fairly the resources and rewards of society. Also a social condition and an ideological position which finds justification in the biblical dictum, “the poor will always be with us”, poverty is accepted as a given in the region, and it is also accepted that this social scourge should be ameliorated, but not eradicated or ripped out by its roots.

In 1972, George Beckford, political economist and University of the West Indies scholar stated that poverty exists in the countries of the ‘Third World’, but it does not have to persist. Beckford was responding to the historical and growing levels of poverty brought on by the ‘underdevelopment’ of ex-colonial societies in the ‘Third World’: tropical Asia and tropical America. According to Beckford, the underdevelopment of the Caribbean and countries of the South was not accidental. In his seminal work, Persistent Poverty: Underdevelopment in Plantation Economies of the Third World (1972) Beckford argued that ‘underdevelopment’ stemmed from unequal relations between the South and the North through colonial domination, capitalism and slavery, and poverty was a consequence of this retarded development experienced by these ex-colonies. At the same time, Walter Rodney, also a Caribbean scholar, argued in a similar vein. In his How Europe Underdeveloped Africa (1972) Rodney attributes underdevelopment and the existence of national and personal poverty to the historical
exploitative relationship Europe (England, France, Holland, Portugal, Belgium, Germany) enjoyed with Africa, a case which can be generalised to the Caribbean. In both cases, these political economists, who have contributed much to an understanding of the dynamics of underdevelopment, development and poverty, speak to the extraction of natural resources and transfer of wealth from the South by the North, the unequal terms of trade (resulting in balance of payments deficits) unfavourable terms of foreign investment through historical and contemporary imperial domination. For both Beckford and Rodney, ‘underdevelopment’, social disadvantage, social exclusion and material deprivation can only be addressed in historical, structural and institutional terms which could also mean that countries of the Americas, Africa and Asia would seek not just to extricate themselves from the sphere of capitalism, but also to secure, within the international political economy, favourable terms of trade, production and exchange, investment and aid. It would also mean, *inter alia* a government ideologically predisposed to addressing issues of social justice, and the embrace of social and economic policies by a strong state sector which would also address the psychological damage to peoples psyche brought on by centuries of colonial domination. It would also mean a commitment to a women’s agenda and the prioritisation of women’s issues in the process of planning for development since poor and working women continue to face the many obstacles which have historically hampered their ability to achieve social progress and economic independence and to ensure sustainable livelihoods for themselves and their families.

But if governments continue to hold ‘economics’ as the primary factor in poverty alleviation, at the expense of human rights, social justice, equal and just relations between and among all people, political involvement at the lowest levels, then this whole issue of poverty alleviation/reduction/eradication will remain the myth it is for our people and for our women. For, in the final analysis, the question is: can there be justice in the framework of injustice?

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**RECOMMENDED READINGS**


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1 This paper was delivered at a public lecture in Guyana, January 19, 2011. The section on ‘poverty alleviation’ was first carried by *Abeng News* January 23 & 24, 2009.

2 See “Women and Global Poverty” at https://www.unpac.ca/economy/wompoverty2.html