

Poverty in the 21st Century: A Critique of Dominant Paradigms and Alternative Perspectives for Developing Countries - The Case of Morocco

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Abstract

This article critically examines why poverty persists despite three decades of prioritized anti-poverty policies, particularly in developing countries like Morocco. It argues that conceptual and epistemological limitations of dominant poverty paradigms constrain policy effectiveness when addressing cumulative socio-economic challenges. Through a critical analysis of poverty conceptualizations and their evolution, the paper deconstructs implicit assumptions underlying anti-poverty policies, revealing significant blind spots: the myth of automatic inclusive growth, technocratic depoliticization of poverty issues, and underestimation of structural factors. Morocco serves as an illustrative case study, demonstrating how, despite notable progress in reducing monetary poverty, persistent vulnerabilities and inequalities reveal the limitations of conventional approaches. The article proposes reconceptualizing poverty through relational and political perspectives that acknowledge power structures and systemic factors, advocating for transformative rather than compensatory policies. For Morocco specifically, this implies rethinking the social contract, strengthening local solidarity innovations, and balancing institutional reforms with social mobilization to achieve sustainable socio-economic transformation.

Keywords: Poverty paradigms, policy critique, multidimensional poverty, Morocco, structural factors, transformative policies, social justice, development alternatives

Introduction

Despite three decades of prioritizing poverty reduction in global and national development agendas, poverty persists with remarkable resilience, particularly in developing countries. This paradox raises fundamental questions about our conceptual understanding of poverty and the effectiveness of resulting policies. This article critically examines why, despite significant resources and political attention, anti-poverty policies often fail to adequately address the cumulative socio-economic challenges faced by populations.

The central argument is that dominant poverty paradigms contain conceptual and epistemological limitations that constrain the effectiveness of resulting policies. These limitations include tendencies toward objectification and quantification, focus on individual characteristics rather than social relations, and depoliticization of poverty and inequality issues. By examining these limitations through the case of Morocco, we can better understand the persistent gap between policy intentions and outcomes.

Morocco presents a particularly relevant case study. Despite being celebrated for its poverty reduction achievements, with monetary poverty rates falling from 15.3% in 2001 to 4.8% in 2014 (HCP, 2017), the country continues to face significant socio-economic challenges. These include persistent vulnerability, spatial inequalities, precarious employment, and limited access to quality public services. The National Human Development Initiative (INDH), launched in 2005, exemplifies both the innovations and limitations of contemporary anti-poverty approaches in Morocco.

This article aims to contribute to both theoretical debates on poverty conceptualization and practical discussions on policy effectiveness. It proposes alternative conceptual frameworks and policy approaches that could better address the complex, multidimensional, and structural nature of poverty in developing countries.

Critical Genealogy of Poverty Paradigms

From Monetary Approaches to Multidimensional Conceptions

The evolution of poverty paradigms reflects changing understandings of human development and wellbeing. Initially dominated by monetary approaches that defined poverty as income or consumption below a certain threshold, these conceptions gradually expanded to incorporate non-monetary dimensions.

The monetary approach, exemplified by the World Bank's

international poverty lines, offers apparent simplicity and comparability but reduces poverty to a single dimension. As Ravallion (2009, p.76) notes, “Money-metric measures provide an analytically convenient summary, but inevitably lose information about specific dimensions of deprivation.” This approach assumes that markets function effectively and that income adequately represents access to wellbeing.

The basic needs approach emerged in the 1970s, shifting focus to access to essential goods and services. This approach, championed by the International Labour Organization, emphasized minimum requirements for physical survival and basic services like water, sanitation, education, and healthcare (ILO, 2011). While more multidimensional, it remained largely expert-defined and normative.

The capabilities approach, developed by Sen (1999), represented a significant paradigm shift by defining poverty as deprivation of basic capabilities—the freedom to achieve valued functionings. This approach influenced the Human Development Index and Multidimensional Poverty Index, which measure poverty through education, health, and living standards indicators. As Sen (1999, p.87) argues, “Development requires the removal of major sources of unfreedom: poverty as well as tyranny, poor economic opportunities as well as systematic social deprivation.”

While these evolutions have enriched poverty conceptualization, they maintain problematic continuities: objectification and quantification tendencies, focus on individual characteristics rather than social relations, and depoliticization of poverty issues.

Persistent Epistemological and Political Biases

Despite their evolution, dominant poverty paradigms contain persistent biases that limit their effectiveness. First, they privilege expert knowledge over lived experiences, creating what Chambers (1995, p.173) calls “whose reality counts?” dilemmas. The voices, perspectives, and knowledge of people experiencing poverty remain marginalized in defining what poverty is and how it should be addressed.

Second, these paradigms tend to individualize and decontextualize poverty, focusing on characteristics of “the poor” rather than on the social, economic, and political processes that produce and reproduce poverty. As Green and Hulme (2005, p.867) argue, “Poverty analysis has been dominated by a focus on correlates and characteristics rather than on causes.”

Third, dominant approaches often depoliticize poverty by treating it as a technical problem rather than a political and ethical issue involving power relations and resource distribution. Ferguson’s (1994) concept of the “anti-politics machine” describes how development discourse transforms political questions of inequality and injustice into technical problems

requiring expert intervention.

These biases have significant implications for policy design and implementation, often leading to interventions that address symptoms rather than causes, focus on individual behavior change rather than structural transformation, and rely on technical solutions rather than political and social change.

Deconstructing the Implicit Presuppositions of Anti-Poverty Policies The Myth of Automatic Inclusive Growth

A central assumption in many anti-poverty policies is that economic growth automatically translates into poverty reduction. This “trickle-down” theory suggests that growth benefits eventually reach the poorest segments of society. However, empirical evidence increasingly challenges this assumption.

Loayza and Raddatz (2010, p.137) demonstrate that “the composition of growth matters substantially for poverty alleviation,” with labor-intensive sectors having greater poverty-reducing effects. Similarly, Ravallion (2004) shows that the same rate of growth can have vastly different impacts on poverty depending on initial inequalities and how growth affects distribution. In Morocco, despite sustained economic growth averaging 4.2% annually between 2000-2014, benefits have been unevenly distributed. The Gini coefficient remained high at 0.395 in 2014, with the richest 10% capturing 31.6% of total income compared to 2.6% for the poorest 10% (HCP, 2016). This illustrates how growth can occur without significantly improving conditions for the most disadvantaged.

The assumption of automatic inclusive growth neglects how economic structures, power relations, and policy choices determine who benefits from growth. As Chang (2003, p.112) argues, “History shows that the relationship between growth and poverty reduction is mediated by institutions and policies that determine how growth benefits are distributed.”

The Technocratic and Depoliticized Illusion

Anti-poverty policies often adopt a technocratic approach that treats poverty as a technical problem solvable through expert intervention rather than as a political issue involving conflicting interests and power relations. This depoliticization manifests in several ways.

First, poverty reduction is frequently framed as a matter of targeting efficiency rather than social justice. Coady et al. (2004, p.83) note that “discussions of targeting often focus narrowly on minimizing errors of inclusion and exclusion, rather than on broader questions of social protection as a right.” This approach privileges technical efficiency over political considerations of rights and entitlements.

Second, anti-poverty programs often focus on changing individual behaviors rather than addressing structural constraints. Conditional cash transfer programs, for example, typically require beneficiaries to meet certain conditions (school attendance, health check-ups) that implicitly locate the “problem” in individual behavior rather than in systemic failures of public service provision or labor market structures.

In Morocco, the INDH exemplifies this technocratic approach. While innovative in its participatory rhetoric, studies by Bergh (2012) and Bono (2010) show how it operates primarily as a technical intervention that avoids addressing fundamental power imbalances and structural causes of poverty. Bergh (2012, p.412) argues that the INDH represents “inclusive neoliberalism” that “incorporates participation and social concerns while avoiding fundamental redistribution of power and resources.”

The Blind Spot of Structural and Systemic Factors

Dominant anti-poverty approaches often underestimate or ignore structural and systemic factors that create and maintain poverty. These include:

1. **Macroeconomic constraints:** Policies like fiscal austerity, privatization, and trade liberalization can undermine poverty reduction efforts. Easterly (2005) found that structural adjustment programs often failed to deliver promised growth while imposing significant social costs.
2. **Colonial legacies and global inequalities:** Historical processes of colonization and ongoing global power asymmetries shape development possibilities. Acemoglu et al. (2001) demonstrate how colonial institutions continue to influence contemporary economic outcomes.
3. **Power dynamics and exclusion:** Social, economic, and political exclusion mechanisms systematically disadvantage certain groups. Stewart (2005) highlights how “horizontal inequalities” between culturally defined groups persist through interlocking political, economic, and social mechanisms.

In Morocco, structural factors significantly impact poverty dynamics. The country’s position in global value chains, dominated by low-value activities, limits economic opportunities (Gereffi et al., 2005). Historical center-periphery divides, reinforced during the colonial period, continue to shape spatial inequalities (Bennafla & Emperador, 2010). Gender inequalities, embedded in legal frameworks and social norms, systematically disadvantage women despite recent reforms (Ennaji, 2016).

By neglecting these structural dimensions, anti-poverty policies often

address symptoms rather than causes, leading to temporary improvements that prove unsustainable when confronting deeper systemic issues.

The Moroccan Case: Revealing the Contradictions of Dominant Paradigms

Paradoxes of the Fight Against Poverty in Morocco

Morocco presents a paradoxical case of poverty reduction. Official statistics show significant progress, with monetary poverty declining from 15.3% in 2001 to 4.8% in 2014 (HCP, 2017). However, this apparent success masks persistent vulnerabilities and inequalities.

First, while extreme poverty has decreased, vulnerability remains high. According to the HCP (2018), 12.5% of the population remains economically vulnerable, living just above the poverty line and at risk of falling back into poverty with any economic shock—as demonstrated during the COVID-19 pandemic when an estimated 1.2 million Moroccans fell below the poverty line (HCP, 2020).

Second, spatial inequalities persist and in some cases have worsened. Rural poverty rates (9.5%) remain nearly four times higher than urban rates (1.6%), and regional disparities are stark, with poverty rates in the southern and eastern regions significantly higher than in coastal areas (ONDH, 2017). These disparities reflect historical center-periphery dynamics and uneven development policies.

Third, despite overall economic growth, social mobility remains limited. The Conseil Économique, Social et Environnemental (2019) reports that intergenerational social mobility has stagnated, with family background strongly determining educational and economic outcomes. This contradicts the narrative of poverty reduction creating expanded opportunities for all. These paradoxes reveal the limitations of conventional poverty measures and the need for more nuanced understandings of socio-economic challenges.

The INDH and Social Policies: Innovations and Conceptual Limits

The National Human Development Initiative (INDH), represents Morocco's flagship anti-poverty program. With a budget exceeding 40 billion dirhams across its three phases (2005-2023), it aims to reduce social deficits, promote income-generating activities, and strengthen governance through participatory approaches.

The INDH has introduced important innovations, including decentralized implementation, participatory planning processes, and integrated approaches combining infrastructure, services, and economic opportunities. The Coordination Nationale de l'INDH (2019) reports significant achievements: 43,000 projects benefiting 10.5 million people, improved basic infrastructure in 3,300 rural communities, and support for

9,400 income-generating activities.

However, evaluations reveal conceptual and operational limitations. The Cour des Comptes (2018) identified governance challenges, including limited genuine participation, elite capture of resources, and weak sustainability of projects. More fundamentally, Berriane (2010, p.92) argues that the INDH operates within a “charitable and paternalistic framework” that treats beneficiaries as passive recipients rather than rights-holders.

The INDH exemplifies the limitations of dominant poverty paradigms: it focuses on symptoms rather than structural causes, adopts a technocratic approach to fundamentally political issues, and operates within existing power structures rather than challenging them. As Bono (2012, p.153) concludes, the INDH represents “social normalization rather than participatory democracy,” managing social tensions without addressing their root causes.

Specific Challenges of the Moroccan Context

Morocco faces specific contextual challenges that complicate poverty reduction efforts and highlight the limitations of conventional approaches.

First, the tension between economic modernization and social fragmentation creates contradictions in development policies. While Morocco has pursued ambitious infrastructure projects and global integration, these have not necessarily translated into improved living conditions for vulnerable populations. Catusse (2010, p.123) describes this as “a fragile social state within neoliberal reform,” where economic liberalization has outpaced social protection development.

Second, the gap between macro indicators and micro realities creates divergent narratives about Morocco’s development. While official statistics and international organizations often celebrate Morocco’s progress, surveys reveal widespread dissatisfaction with living conditions. The Arab Barometer (2019) found that 70% of Moroccans described the country’s economic situation as “bad” or “very bad,” despite positive macroeconomic indicators.

Third, the complex interplay between formal institutions and informal practices creates implementation challenges for anti-poverty policies. Hibou and Tozy (2020) describe how policy implementation in Morocco is shaped by complex networks of patronage and intermediation that often divert resources from intended beneficiaries and reinforce existing power structures.

These specific challenges highlight the need for contextually grounded approaches that address not only technical aspects of poverty but also its political, social, and cultural dimensions.

Towards a Reconceptualization of Poverty and Public Policies

Rethinking Poverty: Towards a Relational and Political Approach

Moving beyond the limitations of dominant paradigms requires reconceptualizing poverty in several ways:

First, shifting from states to processes—understanding poverty not as a condition but as a dynamic process embedded in social, economic, and political relations. As Mosse (2010, p.1157) argues, “A relational approach to poverty directs attention to the social categorizations, institutions, and mechanisms that perpetuate poverty rather than to the characteristics of poor people.”

Second, integrating subjective, relational, and cultural dimensions often neglected in conventional approaches. Appadurai’s (2004) concept of the “capacity to aspire” highlights how poverty involves not only material deprivation but also constraints on the ability to imagine and pursue alternative futures. Similarly, Wood (2003) describes how insecurity forces poor people into dependent relationships that provide short-term security at the cost of long-term advancement.

Third, recognizing poverty as fundamentally political—involving questions of power, rights, and justice. As Hickey and du Toit (2007, p.4) argue, “Chronic poverty cannot be understood in terms of the characteristics of poor people alone, but must be understood in terms of the social relations and structures within which poor people are embedded.”

This reconceptualization has significant implications for research and policy, suggesting the need for approaches that examine power relations, structural constraints, and the political economy of poverty rather than focusing narrowly on measuring and targeting “the poor.”

Rethinking Public Policies: Towards Transformative Approaches

Reconceptualizing poverty implies rethinking anti-poverty policies in several ways:

First, moving from “fighting poverty” to building just and inclusive societies. This shift emphasizes universal approaches to social protection, public services, and economic opportunities rather than narrowly targeted interventions. Mkandawire (2005) demonstrates how universal social policies can be more effective and sustainable than targeted approaches, avoiding stigmatization and political vulnerability while building broader constituencies for social protection.

Second, articulating economic, social, and environmental policies in a coherent framework. Raworth’s (2017) “doughnut economics” model offers a useful framework for balancing social needs with environmental boundaries. Similarly, Gibson-Graham et al. (2013) propose diverse economy approaches that recognize and strengthen non-capitalist economic

practices that often support livelihoods in marginalized communities.

Third, strengthening agency and collective capabilities rather than focusing solely on individual assets and behaviors. Cornwall and Gaventa (2000) advocate shifting from treating poor people as “users and choosers” of services to “makers and shapers” of policies and institutions. This implies supporting collective organization, strengthening accountability mechanisms, and creating spaces for meaningful participation in decision-making.

These approaches represent a shift from compensatory to transformative policies - addressing not only the symptoms of poverty but also its structural causes through institutional change and power redistribution.

Implications for the Moroccan Context

For Morocco specifically, reconceptualizing poverty and public policies has three main implications:

First, rethinking the social contract around rights, participation, and accountability. The Conseil Économique, Social et Environnemental (2019) calls for a “new development model” based on expanded social rights, inclusive governance, and territorial equity. This would require moving beyond the current paternalistic welfare approach toward rights-based social protection and participatory governance.

Second, valuing and strengthening local solidarities and innovations. Morocco has a rich tradition of community-based solidarity mechanisms and social innovations that often remain invisible in formal policy frameworks. Kretzmann and McKnight’s (1993) asset-based community development approach offers useful insights for identifying and building upon these local strengths rather than imposing external solutions.

Third, articulating institutional reforms with social mobilizations. Sustainable transformation typically results from dynamic interaction between “change from above” and “change from below.” Bennani-Chraïbi (2017) analyzes how social movements in Morocco have influenced policy reforms through complex processes of contestation and negotiation. Supporting these dynamics requires creating spaces for civic engagement and strengthening intermediary institutions that can translate social demands into policy changes.

These implications suggest a more complex and politically engaged approach to addressing poverty in Morocco—one that recognizes the interplay between economic structures, social relations, and political processes in shaping both problems and solutions.

Conclusion

This critical examination of poverty paradigms and policies, with particular attention to the Moroccan case, has revealed significant conceptual and practical limitations in dominant approaches. Despite their evolution toward more multidimensional understandings, conventional poverty paradigms continue to objectify and depoliticize poverty, focusing on individual characteristics rather than structural causes and treating fundamentally political issues as technical problems.

These limitations help explain the paradoxical persistence of poverty and vulnerability despite decades of targeted interventions. In Morocco, despite notable progress in reducing monetary poverty, significant challenges remain: persistent vulnerability, spatial inequalities, limited social mobility, and gaps between macro indicators and lived experiences. The National Human Development Initiative, while innovative in some respects, exemplifies both the potential and limitations of contemporary anti-poverty approaches.

Moving forward requires reconceptualizing poverty as relational, processual, and political rather than as a static condition of individuals or households. This reconceptualization implies shifting from narrowly targeted anti-poverty programs toward transformative approaches that address structural causes, strengthen collective capabilities, and build more just and inclusive societies.

For Morocco specifically, this means rethinking the social contract around rights and participation rather than paternalistic welfare, valuing local solidarities and innovations alongside formal interventions, and articulating institutional reforms with social mobilizations. These approaches offer more promising pathways for addressing the complex, multidimensional challenges of poverty and inequality in the 21st century.

By critically examining dominant paradigms and exploring alternative perspectives, this article contributes to both theoretical debates on poverty conceptualization and practical discussions on policy effectiveness. It suggests that addressing poverty sustainably requires not just technical refinements to existing approaches but fundamental reconsideration of how we understand and respond to the complex socio-economic challenges facing developing countries like Morocco.

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