



How the Poor Survive: Strategies for Livelihood

"We cannot suffer with the poor when we are unwilling to confront those persons and systems that cause poverty" ¹

1. Introduction

The gap between the rich and the poor has always existed. Poor people have been left on the periphery of society with minimal access to basic services, in relation to the rich who have access to a wide variety of goods and services. And so, in many ways, the poor have had to create their own ways of getting what they need. This paper will seek to outline some of the ways the poor have manoeuvred and struggled in order to survive with what they have.

Theorists have for years argued that poor people live lives of suffering, in dire situations with no hope of improvement. The truth, though, is more complex: the majority of the poor have found ways to enhance their livelihoods and alter their situations; and in recent years other theorists have noted these changes across the globe, and have chosen to highlight some of the ways in which the poor manage to survive.

2. The Way Poor People Are Regarded

South Africa is well-known for the extreme gap that exists between its richest and poorest citizens; our country has one of the worst Gini coefficients in the world. Every day we pass by people begging for money or food on the streets or at intersections, and our many welfare organisations are kept busy attending to their needs. Encouragingly, poverty alleviation is also a priority for the government, and many projects have been initiated to deal with it. For example, the National Development Plan deals with various core elements of the problem, such as:

- Housing, water, electricity and sanitation
- Safe and reliable public transport

- Quality education and skills development
- Safety and security
- Quality health care
- Social protection
- Employment
- Recreation and leisure
- Clean environment; and
- Adequate nutrition.²

All of these issues affect the poor, many of them disproportionately so. However, as the plan has still to be implemented, the poor have to decide how to survive in the meantime.

Many academics have come up with theories to explain why poor people often go unseen. One author believes that governments see the poor as one sub-grouping of ordinary citizens³. The middle-class and the rich are required to pay income tax, and this forms a major part of their formal engagement with the state; but the poor do not pay income tax, and therefore lack this engagement with the state. If their incomes do not allow them to contribute to the growth of the country, then why would governments pay attention to them? Citizens who have a 'right to the city'⁴ are the ones who have access to services that the poor are unable to receive. These citizens are able to assert their right because of the wealth they possess, and are usually identified through their abilities to pay tax (or property rates), to live in a house, to pay their bills and to maintain a job with a steady income. They are part of the formal economy. In direct contrast, the informal economy comprises mainly the poor: large groupings of people who are unable to maintain a steady income, who are unable to pay tax, and who cannot afford to pay bills or put enough food on the table. They are largely unable to assert their claim to their rights

as citizens and cannot fully participate in urban life; they are forced to live on the peripheries, in slums, or in informal settlements.

In essence, the conclusion that authors have come to is that governments have sought to manage the poor by treating them as part of the population, but not as *active citizenry*⁵. Government then carries out basic policies, such as providing free basic healthcare or no-fee schools, and in this way claims to provide for the well-being of the poor, but without actually improving their lives by changing the way they live.

Thus, the poor go unnoticed by the state; at best, they are recipients of state action, rather than actors themselves. They are noticed only during election times, when their votes are of utmost importance to the various parties, a sight we may start noticing soon, as the 2014 elections approach. In the meanwhile, though, poor people seek ways to survive, and to get access to what they need.

3. The Only Options

What follows are some of the ways in which the poor have positioned themselves in the world, and in particular in South Africa, to make their voices heard, to acquire the goods and services they need, or simply to keep out of government's sight in order to ensure that their livelihoods are secured.

3.1. Insurgency

Often the best way to make your voice heard is to make sure that no-one can ignore how loud you are screaming. In the same way, insurgency is an act of organizing oneself amongst a group of people in order to confront a particular issue. Acts of insurgency come about through anger, or through a lack of change and a frustration with the way things have been. One author argues that "insurgency...begins with a struggle for the right to have a daily life in the city worthy of a citizen's dignity."⁶

In South Africa, insurgency is most often manifested in various forms of public protest: demonstrations outside Parliament, government offices and embassies⁷; marches by trade unions and civic bodies⁸; and sometimes in violent action. In the Western Cape, people angry at what they consider to be poor service delivery have

taken to throwing faeces at the Provincial Legislature, at Cape Town International Airport, and at government officials and vehicles.⁹ Indeed, in recent years South Africa has quickly become known as the "protest capital of the world".¹⁰ In Gauteng recently there were 560 protests in a period of 40 days, and 40 of these were classed as violent, according to the Gauteng police commissioner¹¹.

It is necessary, then, to understand why all this is happening. A lack of confidence in what the political system, and specifically the government, has done up to now means that protestors have little faith that programmes will be implemented that will alter their situations. The fact that they stand up and try to take ownership of their rights – such as their rights to water, clean sanitation, housing, education – means that they are fed up with the broken promises that parties and politicians have made to them but which never become a reality for them.

Poor people who engage in insurgent politics choose to protest actively against the authorities instead of changing their vote as an expression of their dissatisfaction with what a particular party has done in their lives. In this way, as much as their protest reflects their dissatisfaction towards the government, it also reflects their loyalty towards the relevant governing parties (the DA in the Western Cape or the ANC in Gauteng). They want the party in charge to improve its performance, but they don't want to change their loyalties.

3.2. Patronage

'It's not what you know but who you know' – the old adage about how to get what you need has become a tactic for the poor; it ensures that their needs are met, while in turn ensuring that those offering to supply their needs get something in return. Patron-client relations are based on mutually beneficial relationships in which transactions of goods and services for money, power or position form the basis.

For many of the South African poor, exchanging their vote for some service – such as electricity, food, money or the promise of a job – provides them with an option to overcome the situation they face, and allows the patron a guarantee of power during elections in that particular area. The reality that a group of people may not believe in the ideas outlined by a particular party, but may still feel obliged to agree to their terms in

exchange for goods, means that many of the poor are swayed more by what they can gain in the short term than by what the party can do for the wider community in the long term. This also means that the patron prioritises one neighbourhood – because they are willing to exchange their votes for goods or services – above another poorer community which may need the services more, but which may not be willing to partake in the questionable behaviour of selling their votes.¹²

In this way, poor people become part of a system that prioritises their needs and values their votes, thus demonstrating that even smaller and poorer communities may have power despite not being a part of the middle-class income-earning group. This is a lesson that politicians should pay attention to: the poor will do all they can to get what they need, and if parties need votes then forming and maintaining relationships with poor communities is one way of getting them. However, to be ethical, the relationship should endure beyond election time: during their terms of office the elected representatives should continue to see to the needs of these communities.

3.3. Hiding from the state

If the only alternative is to 'hide' and to do what needs to be done, then that is what the poor will do. For many, their circumstances and ways of living leave them no option but to sustain themselves through illegal activities and a kind of 'stealth politics' in which they avoid legal requirements – such as licences and regulatory requirements – that would threaten their precarious livelihoods. These silent and hidden manoeuvres are a survival strategy for those who merely seek to get by.

Many of the poor who undertake this type of survival do so by living in areas outside of formal society. For example, the illegal occupation of land is all too prevalent in South Africa, with numerous informal settlements in all of our nine provinces. Then there is also the factor of unlicensed or unregulated work: the informal economy is full of poor families who have sought to make their money out of fruit and vegetable stands, shebeens and spaza shops that have become all too common sights in many neighbourhoods. Legal basic conditions of employment are seldom met in these enterprises, and they often violate zoning requirements, but it is precisely in this way that poor people have to

evade the authorities in an attempt to make money and sustain their families.

The poor also use illegal means of accessing services, such as tapping into power lines in order to get electricity. They would rather resort to stealing power than wait for the government to supply it. Or, to put it differently, they *cannot afford to wait* for the government to get around to supplying it.

The Sustainable Livelihoods Foundation has undertaken a census of micro-enterprises in three of South Africa's provinces in order to assess the ways in which the poor engage within the informal economy. In their research, they have found that "more than 90% of liquor retailers are unregulated and operate illegally."¹³ These businesses are the main source of income for their operators, and have allowed for job creation within impoverished communities. The research has also established that foreign nationals run 50% of spaza shops. This is indicative of the massive growth in the number of refugees and other foreigners who choose to access their needs through stealth-like, illegal behaviour out of the sight of the authorities. When it is impossible to enter the formal employment market, your survival, and that of your family, dictates that you create your own source of income.

4. Threats to the Livelihoods of the Poor

The Business Licensing Bill recently put forward by the Minister of Trade and Industry, while attempting to create a more stable environment amongst traders, has in fact emerged as a great threat to the livelihoods of poor people who merely seek to survive and to maintain a very modest lifestyle. Poor traders will have to pay for licences they can scarcely afford, or else risk the threat of action by authorities who have the power "of arbitrary revocation, closure, seizure of goods, right of entry and interrogation – all of this without due process and no judicial appeal¹⁴". The greatest threat lies to foreigners, to whom authorities are allowed to refuse a licence. This is but one example of government implementing a programme that will threaten the ways in which the poor have managed to scrape together a livelihood.

In the same way, the formation of BRICS, while producing a mutually beneficial international relationship, poses a potential threat to the

survival of the poor. The fact that BRICS creates a relationship that allows for the wider importation of cheap foreign goods allows for a possible threat to local industry and its ability to preserve unskilled and semi-skilled jobs; this, in turn, hinders poor people's access to the formal economy. As a result, households may lose their only source of income which in turn means that many families will struggle and be unable to afford basic goods, and will therefore continue to resort to their illegal actions of rebelling against the system, operating illegal businesses, and hiding from the state.

5. Conclusion

Poor people are left with few options in their struggle to survive and to keep their families healthy, warm and fed. In 2007 the American Catholic Bishops stated, "While the common good embraces all, those who are weak, vulnerable,

and most in need deserve preferential concern. A basic moral test for our society is how we treat the most vulnerable in our midst¹⁵". For South Africans this is current and imperative. The poor should not have to resort to illegal or 'underground' strategies in order to maintain their very basic lifestyles; they also should not have to merely *survive*. Their rights should be realised in ways that mean they can live without continually feeling threatened by authorities and afraid of what could happen. Instead, the poor should be able to live in ways that allow them to partake in the wealth and opportunity of South Africa, and which allow them to exercise and develop their skills and abilities so as to become fully part of the formal economy in a country that nurtures and respects all its people.

Angelique Thomas
Research Intern

¹ Henri J.M. Noumen Donald P. McNeil Douglas A. Morrison. (2013). Goodreads.com/quotes/tag/poverty?page=2. Accessed 01/08/2013

² Government Communication and Information System (2013). Implementation of the National Development Plan - Post-SoNA media briefing by Ministers Trevor Manuel and Collins Chabane.

³ Chatterjee, P. (2004). The politics of the Governed: Reflections on Popular Politics in Most of the World. New York: Columbia University Press.

⁴ Huchzermeyer, M. (2011) *Cities With 'Slums': From Slum Eradication to a Right to the City in Africa*. Juta/UCT Press, Cape Town. <http://uctpress.bookslive.co.za/blog/2011/10/19/marie-huchzermeyer-studies-informal-settlement-eradication-in-cities-with-slums/>

⁵ See ³

⁶ Holston, J. (2009). Insurgent citizenship in an era of global peripheries. *City and Society*. 21 (2), pp 245-267.

⁷ Makurdi, W. (2013). Hundreds protest at U.S. embassy in South Africa against President Barack Obama's visit. *The Globe and Mail*. Accessed 9-08-2013.

⁸ Davis, R. (2013). Sadtu's march, Cape Town: Full-blown strike on the horizon.

⁹ Davis, R. (2013). Cape Town: ANC's attempt at politics ends with a whimper. *Daily Maverick*. Accessed 09-08-2013.

¹⁰ Patel. (2013). Public protests: Gauteng's rising pressure cooker. *Daily Maverick*. Accessed 29-05-2013.

¹¹ See ⁶

¹² There are not many instances on record in South Africa of political parties 'buying' votes in this manner, but it is a phenomenon well-documented in Zimbabwe. It was noticeable, however, that a few days before the recent municipal by-election in Tlokwe, in the North-West Province, where the ANC had lost control of the municipality to the DA, the national Minister of Social Development was handing out food parcels to needy families. Likewise, it was reported that the ANC and the DA both offered to build a rudimentary house for a homeless voter in Oudtshoorn, if he promised to vote for them in a by-election.

¹³ Understanding South Africa's Informal Economy. (2011). Livelihoods.org.za

¹⁴ Hlongwane, S. (2013). Licencing of Business Bill: A titanic mess of admin and poor logic. DailyMaverick.co.za. Accessed 14-06-2013.

¹⁵ U.S. Catholic Bishops. (2007) *Forming Consciences for Faithful citizenship. Catholic Social Teaching on Poverty, an Option for the Poor, and the Common Good*. Department of Justice, Peace and Human Development . usccb.org/jphd