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The Global Poor as Agents of Justice

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Abstract

“Agent-centered” approaches to global poverty insist that effective arguments for poverty reduction must specify the concrete duties of particular duty-bearers. This article takes up a recent, influential, version of this view, Thomas Pogge’s human rights-based argument for global economic reforms to reduce chronic deprivation. While signaling a welcome shift from the diffuse allocation of responsibilities common to much philosophical writing on poverty, I argue that Pogge’s approach too readily assigns to powerful institutions in the global North the role of devising and directing anti-poverty initiatives. In so doing, he overlooks the agency—actual and potential—of the poor themselves, as evidenced by poor-led political movements and poor-centered, participatory models of poverty reduction in development theory and practice. While agent-oriented approaches are right to focus our attention on structures that cause poverty, they ought not to assume that the powerful agents responsible for these are the only—or most appropriate—agents to lead the way to poverty reduction. Just as development organizations working in the global South have come to recognize that the participation of poor communities is critical to the success of development strategies, so should normative theorists writing about global injustice acknowledge the importance of the poor as active agents in poverty reduction efforts.

Keywords

Thomas Pogge – poverty – empowerment – political agency – global justice

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Normative theorizing about poverty generally asks which moral duties arise in connection with severe human deprivation, and for what reasons. As moral debates about how best to respond to global inequality and poverty have evolved in recent years, however, some thinkers have been moved to do more than enumerate and justify broad obligations to help the world's poor. Rejecting the overly diffuse account of duties to meet acute needs that is characteristic of much writing in this area, some leading ethicists now insist that the force and credibility of moral arguments regarding poverty depend upon the identification of *particular* duty-bearers and *specific* obligations. Focusing on concrete agents and their duties rather than on would-be recipients and their needs, this 'agent-centered' approach to poverty,¹ as I shall call it, was first defended by Onora O'Neill, employing a Kantian, action-based moral framework.² More recently, it has been advanced by Thomas Pogge, using a human rights-based argument to assign poverty-alleviating obligations to global institutions whose trade policies and economic practices harm the poor in developing countries.³ In focusing upon agents and their duties, this approach distinguishes itself from consequentialist and some virtue-ethical responses to poverty, according to which obligations arise from the sheer *fact* of suffering and need.⁴ The contrast is sharpest in relation to Utilitarian writings on poverty, which assign responsibility very broadly to any entity that is conceivably in a position to help—including individuals with resources exceeding the minimum necessary to meet their own basic needs.⁵

1 I use the term 'agent-centered approach' to refer to normative perspectives on poverty and global justice that foreground the moral duties of agents. Note that this usage contrasts with Amartya Sen's use of the phrase 'agent-oriented view,' by which he means an approach to development and capability-building that treats the intended beneficiaries of development as active agents towards this end. See Sen, *Development as Freedom* (New York: Anchor Books, 1999).

2 See especially Onora O'Neill, *Bounds of Justice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000) and O'Neill, 'Agents of Justice,' in *Global Justice*, ed. Thomas Pogge (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2001), pp. 188–203.

3 Thomas Pogge, *World Poverty and Human Rights*, 2nd edition (Malden, MA.: Polity Press, 2008).

4 Peter Singer's 'Famine, Affluence and Morality,' *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 1 (1972), pp. 229–43, remains the classic statement of an act-Utilitarian approach to poverty. Examples of broadly virtue-ethical responses include Nigel Dower's 'The Nature and Scope of Development Ethics,' *Journal of Global Ethics* 4 (2008), pp. 183–93, and Abigail Gosselin's *Global Poverty and Individual Responsibility* (Plymouth, U.K.: Lexington Books, 2009).

5 As Andrew Kuper notes, 'the 'we' that Singer addresses are single and fairly undifferentiated wealthy individuals.' See Kuper, 'More Than Charity: Cosmopolitan Alternatives to the 'Singer Solution,' *Ethics and International Affairs* 16 (2002), pp. 107–28, at p. 16.

The claim that a sound moral argument for poverty reduction must designate particular ‘agents of justice’⁶ signals a welcome shift in global justice theorizing: by connecting normative claims to poverty relief with individuals and institutions whose roles and capacities enable—or indeed, require—they to undertake effective action, we move away from aspirational yet arguably ineffective arguments for reducing poverty. But this move comes at a cost, as I shall argue. In assigning poverty-related obligations to the governments and institutions—and to a lesser extent, citizens—of affluent states and regions, the agent-centered approach has tended to ignore the actual and potential agency of the poor themselves. Stressing capability (O’Neill) and culpability (Pogge) as the key criteria for designating agents of global justice, this view easily overlooks the vital political contributions and perspectives of less powerful individuals and groups—namely, the poor and their advocates. This is not an inevitable feature of the agent-centered approach, however: proponents can, and should, expand their account of those who can act as agents to reduce global poverty. Political movements of the poor in the global South, and national and transnational pro-poor advocacy networks, are a few examples of how poor communities can contribute valuable perspectives and much-needed policy proposals aimed at curtailing severe poverty.

In contrast to the mainly institutional actors emphasized by the agent-centered view, the poor and their advocates are positioned differently as moral and political agents with respect to poverty reduction. In the first place, their status as moral agents does not derive from any responsibility for contributing to the structural apparatus of poverty, a role that Pogge ascribes to global economic institutions. Nor is it attributable to their greater capacities as agents with ample power and demonstrated scope for action, as O’Neill’s account emphasizes.⁷ Rather, the moral agency of the poor arguably stems from their capacity for moral concern and action in response to their own lived experience of poverty, and those of their families and communities. In the case of poor advocacy groups, the capacity and motivation for moral action follow from bearing witness to the experiences of the poor, and from a concern for social justice. Close-up knowledge of poverty, and the political solidarity it can engender, may also make poor communities and their advocacy organizations more effective as *political* agents in certain contexts, especially if they receive practical support. The perspectives that the poor and their advocates can bring to anti-poverty efforts may be especially important in part because their

6 O’Neill, ‘Agents of Justice.’

7 See especially her ‘Transnational Economic Justice,’ in *Bounds of Justice*, and ‘Agents of Justice.’

agendas differ from those of transnational institutions and governments: they aim not only to reduce material deprivation, but to empower—socially and politically—those living in poverty.

Below, I argue that Pogge's influential version of the agent-oriented approach to global justice can and should take a wider view of the agents of change: specifically, it should consider poor communities and pro-poor solidarity networks and movements as critical contributors to efforts to end extreme need. To do so will require four conceptual shifts or modifications, however. First, it will require that we disaggregate the question of which agents are responsible for causing harm from the questions of which actors can potentially reduce poverty, and which are best suited to which tasks. This in turn requires, secondly, a critical reassessment of the role of those actors to which the agent-centered view has tended to assign duties—namely, powerful institutions and citizens in affluent regions. Given their interests, institutions and individuals in the global North may not always, pace Pogge, be best placed to *direct* poverty reduction and development strategies for poor countries; in some instances, genuine change may be better served by pressuring such actors to support the initiatives of collectives in the global South working for pro-poor economic and legal reforms. Third, it will require that the capability criterion at the core of the agent-centered view not be understood as synonymous with existing power (or demonstrated scope for agency). Lastly and relatedly, recognizing the prospective agency of the poor is connected to an expanded view of the aims of poverty reduction, one that includes the social and economic empowerment of the poor.

By recognizing the role that empowered poor communities can play in struggles to reverse chronic poverty, an agent-centered view expanded along the lines suggested here would follow an increasing number of development ethicists and practitioners in acknowledging the poor and their advocates as sources of knowledge, decision-making, and action, rather than seeing them solely as the *beneficiaries* of such efforts. Critiques of development practices have yielded approaches that foreground the participation and perspectives of the poor. While these of course need to be viewed with some skepticism—particularly since mainstream institutions such as the World Bank have taken up the poor-centered rhetoric—normative theorizing about poverty reduction could still, I suggest, benefit from the insights of these approaches. More generally, critical reflection on the position of the poor in theories of global justice should lead moral and political philosophers to recognize that the poor ought to be counted among those who can, with appropriate support and opportunities, reliably serve as agents of justice. Admittedly, the political mobilization of

the poor, often uncoordinated and lacking an effective collective form,⁸ cannot magically bring about the kind of far-reaching, global institutional economic reforms that Pogge urges. Nor should it displace the efforts and advocacy of individuals and institutions in rich states, where these are genuinely constructive. But if the enfranchisement and empowerment of the poor are central goals of global justice, then political movements and initiatives that aim directly at these deserve our serious attention. By expanding its conception of the agents of global justice and thinking more critically about their respective roles and capacities, the agent-centered view becomes more alive to the democratic (and radical) possibilities of deontological perspectives on global justice, all of which share a concern with the vulnerability and disempowerment of persons.

1 Negative Duties and Powerful Agents

For Pogge, it is actors in the global North—governments, national and transnational economic and political institutions, multinational corporations, but also citizens—that are the proper duty-bearers of moral obligations to reduce poverty and chronic unmet needs. The designation of institutional entities such as the World Trade Organization (WTO) as duty bearers might strike some as odd, but for Pogge, these are indeed moral agents (in a non-Kantian sense): like groups or collectivities of persons, which are generally thought to possess moral agency,⁹ they can act in ways that promote the welfare of persons or, contrarily, inflict harm for which they can be said to be responsible. That Pogge assigns the greatest share of moral responsibility for poverty alleviation to transnational economic institutions like the WTO is due in part to their assumed greater capabilities vis à vis the tasks at hand,¹⁰ since reforms to ‘rules governing transnational trade, lending, investment, resource use ... [and] intellectual property’ are in his view key to poverty reduction.¹¹ Just as importantly,

8 See Lars Engberg-Pederson and Neil Webster, ‘Political Agencies and Spaces,’ in *In the Name of the Poor: Contesting Political Space for Poverty Reduction*, ed. N. Webster and L. Engberg-Pedersen (London and New York: Zed Books, 2002), pp. 255–71, esp. pp. 256–58.

9 Vinit Haksar, ‘Moral Agents,’ in *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. E. Craig (London: Routledge Press, 1998).

10 Citizens of affluent states, he notes, also bear indirect responsibility insofar as they help to uphold these institutions through their elected governments. See Pogge, *World Poverty*, p. 70, and Pogge, *Politics as Usual: What Lies Behind the Pro-Poor Rhetoric* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2010), pp. 29–30.

11 Pogge, *Politics as Usual*, p. 53.

however, according to his ‘institutional view’ it is *these* institutions that have created and continue to coercively uphold arrangements that perpetuate North-South inequality and poverty. Pogge cites three specific sources of responsibility: the ‘international resource and borrowing privilege, which contributes ‘to the high incidence of oppressive and corrupt rules in the less developed countries’; the ‘international treaty privilege’; and the ‘international arms privilege.’¹² As a consequence of these factors, global economic institutions bear primary responsibility for reforming the systems of trade and finance.¹³

For Pogge, the question of which agents ought to undertake to transform the structures and circumstances that perpetuate severe poverty is clearly bundled together with the question of which entities hold broad responsibility for causing severe poverty. Nor is he unusual in connecting these two questions: defenders of broadly deontological perspectives of poverty and underdevelopment frequently make this move.¹⁴ Pogge’s human rights-based argument, which imparts negative duties to agents whose actions lead to human rights violations and uncompensated harm, makes this link a natural one: extending the logic of classic negative liberty rights, Pogge contends that we all have a negative duty not to perpetuate systems or arrangements that prevent others from enjoying secure access to the basic necessities of life, in violation of their human rights.¹⁵ Those institutions and economic structures that contribute most directly to the impoverishment of the global poor bear the greatest responsibility for initiating reform, he reasons. Insofar as Pogge’s negative duties argument does not separate out the historical question of who or what bears primary responsibility for causing harm from the political question of which agents ought to direct processes of poverty reduction, it will tend to assume that governments and powerful institutions should direct or lead all poverty reduction efforts. This is particularly so given Pogge’s claim that ‘even small changes in the rules governing international trade, lending in investment, resource use, or intellectual property can have a huge impact on the

12 Pogge, *Politics as Usual*, p. 49.

13 *World Poverty and Human Rights*, p. 70, and Pogge, ‘Human Rights and Human Responsibilities,’ in *Global Justice and Transnational Politics*, ed. Pablo De Grieff and Ciaran Cronin (Cambridge, MA.: MIT Press, 2002), pp. 164–85, at p. 169.

14 For example, writing on the goal of alleviating acute poverty, Bashshar Haydar claims that ‘Determining the appropriate level of responsibility [for poverty] is ... motivated by the need to answer the question of who should do what, and when, in order to alleviate extreme poverty.’ Haydar, ‘Extreme Poverty and Global Responsibility,’ *Metaphilosophy* 36 (2005), pp. 240–53, at p. 251.

15 Pogge, *World Poverty*, p. 66.

global incidence of life-threatening poverty.¹⁶ It is for this reason that he insists that ‘the path of global institutional reform is far more realistic’ than alternative paths to poverty reduction.¹⁷ Unlike Peter Singer and certain other philosophers writing on poverty, Pogge has expressed skepticism about the propensity of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to reduce chronic poverty.¹⁸

2 What Kind of Agents are the Poor?

Pogge is likely correct that the injustices imbedded in global trade regimes, and the lending and investment practices of transnational financial institutions, are chief causes of entrenched poverty in poor countries; he is also, no doubt, right to claim that the coordinated efforts of governments and global economic institutions are needed to effect major structural changes to these arrangements. It is not clear, however, that these entities as they currently exist are always the sole, or—in some contexts—the most trustworthy and capable agents of justice. There are good reasons to disaggregate the questions of responsibility for poverty and an agent’s capacities from the question of which agents should, in different contexts, determine and direct the various processes of poverty reduction. Responsibility and capability do not automatically make a particular agent the most suitable actor in a given context. Most obviously, an entity like a multinational mining corporation may be chiefly responsible for causing food scarcity in a particular region as a result of mining practices that have led to the destruction of local farming activity; and while it may have the power and capability to transform these practices (and so to reduce the community’s poverty), it may well lack the interest and motivation to act against its own perceived interests in support of serious reforms. Similarly, transnational economic institutions like the World Bank and the

16 Pogge, *Politics as Usual*, p. 53.

17 Pogge, *Politics as Usual*, p. 55.

18 Peter Singer, *The Life You Can Save* (New York: Random House, 2009). For a critique of Pogge’s position on the role of non-governmental organizations in poverty reduction, see Lisa Fuller, ‘Poverty Relief, Global Institutions, and the Problem of Compliance,’ *Journal of Moral Philosophy* 2 (2005), pp. 285–97. Advocacy organizations that target the policies of global economic institutions are more welcome: Pogge is an ardent supporter of the international group, ASAP (Academics Stand Against Poverty). See Thomas Pogge and Luis Cabrera, ‘Outreach, Impact, Collaboration: Why Academics Should Stand Against Poverty,’ *Ethics & International Affairs* 26 (2012), pp. 163–82.

International Monetary Fund, and the governments of affluent states, are certainly powerful agents, but they frequently have political and economic agendas that are in tension with the goal of deep reductions in the poverty of populations of the global South.

Beyond the matter of interests and motivations, there are also relevant differences among prospective agents of justice that could make certain actors better placed to undertake certain tasks, especially if we view empowering poor individuals and communities as an important goal. In recent years, a more complex view of poverty as multi-faceted powerlessness has emerged in development circles and among civil society organizations grappling with the effects of globalization. The antidote to such powerlessness is, in part, the expansion of poor-centered strategies for poverty reduction that explicitly foreground the participation and input of poor communities. Pro-poor activism that follows from this approach, while decentralized and wide-ranging, aims to change the policies and structures that prevent poor communities from accessing the resources necessary to escape poverty.¹⁹ Solidarity and social-justice-based organizations in the global South whose membership includes the communities for whom they advocate—informal workers, industrial workers in jurisdictions with labor protections, the unemployed, and so forth—have contributed to what is known as a ‘poor-led’ or ‘pro-poor’ approach to fighting poverty, stressing the need to empower poor communities. The work of these groups and networks can have a real impact on national legislation that impacts the lives of the poor.²⁰ In some Latin American countries, grassroots poor organizations have successfully fought for the implementation of poor-empowering ‘social protection’ schemes,²¹ such as minimum basic income programs and cash transfers to the poor.

The poor and their advocates are moral agents in importantly different ways than transnational economic institutions, corporations, and governments:

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- 19 Lars Engberg-Pedersen and Neil Webster, ‘Introduction to Political Space,’ in *In the Name of the Poor: Contesting Political Space for Poverty Reduction*, ed. N. Webster and L. Engberg-Pedersen (London and New York: Zed Books, 2002), pp. 1–29, at p. 7.
- 20 One prominent example is the global network WIEGO (‘Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing’), which works to improve labor legislation and social protection for female informal workers in several countries through advocacy; a recent victory was the passing of the Unorganized Sector Workers Social Security Bill in India in 2008.
- 21 ‘Social protection’ as an approach to poverty reduction in the developing world has been proposed by development economists for countries in south Asia, Latin America, and sub-Saharan Africa. See for example Armando Barrientos and David Hulme, *Social Protection for the Poor and Poorest* (Basingstoke, U.K. and New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2008).

unlike these latter agents, it is their resolve and capacity to promote the welfare of the poor that qualifies them as moral agents, rather than any demonstrated responsibility for causing poverty. Nor is it clearly the case that the poor have, strictly speaking, special moral *duties* (in the Kantian sense) to alleviate poverty. Although we might say that the poor's duties are commensurate with their capabilities—as Luis Cabrera has recently argued²²—the language of duties does not quite capture the nature of the poor's agency with respect to reducing poverty. Rather, the poor might best be seen as having standing as moral agents because of their capacity for morally motivated action (in the sense described earlier). To the extent that we can say, from an agent-centered perspective, that the poor have moral *duties* vis à vis poverty, these can only be general ones: the duty to respond as best they can to the poverty in which they find themselves and their families, and where possible, to undertake acts of solidarity with fellow persons living in poverty. Supporting fellow workers' attempts to unionize one's workplace, or contributing to the work of poor advocacy groups, are a few examples of such solidarity. Individuals living in poor countries are also sometimes better able to give concrete help to poor persons in distress: Cabrera, for example, discusses the critical assistance (food, shelter, and medical attention) that comparatively well-off persons in poor countries routinely give to their compatriots who are making risky and illegal border crossings.²³

As political agents, then, poor communities and pro-poor organizations also differ from powerful institutions in the global North, for their actions are shaped by the experience of poverty and often by considerations of solidarity with the poor. These differences do not necessarily suggest that they have any unique capability where poverty reduction is concerned (though they may have a better vantage point for effecting change); it seems clear that severe poverty cannot be ended single-handedly by poor mobilization. But given the different motivations and insights of poor communities and organizations, we have good reason to take seriously their contributions to poverty reduction strategies—particularly if the empowerment of the poor is taken to be a central goal of poverty reduction. These critical differences suggest why it is a mistake to overlook the poor as moral and political agents in efforts to reduce poverty, and why political advocacy by the poor, as well as poor-led economic reforms, should be seen as part of the broader struggle against global injustice.

22 Luis Cabrera, *The Practice of Global Citizenship* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), p. 6.

23 Cabrera, *The Practice of Global Citizenship*, chapter 6.

Despite this, the poor are generally overlooked as moral and political agents by proponents of the agent-centered approach, whose attention is focused firmly on the governments and institutions of affluent states.²⁴ This is not to say that this approach casts the poor as mere helpless victims, in the way that Utilitarian perspectives sometimes do. By locating poverty reduction duties within a human rights framework, Pogge's account mitigates against the picture of the passive recipient of aid which features in, say, Peter Singer's discussion, since it emphasizes the agency of the rights-holder.²⁵ According to Pogge's human rights framework, poor individuals of the global South do have equal moral and legal-political claims to dignity and protection of their basic human rights. Moreover, Pogge has recently suggested that 'the actual inclusion of the poor in dialogue about why and how best to improve their circumstances' may be worth pursuing.²⁶ These are promising signs, and support my claim that the agent-oriented approach can certainly encompass poor communities and movements within its account of the agents of global justice. Yet by failing to disaggregate the matter of responsibility for causing harm from the question of who can and should be agents of change in which contexts, Pogge unnecessarily limits his conception of moral and political agency: 'primary responsibility ... for the prevailing global order, lies with the governments and citizens of the wealthy countries, because we maintain this order, with at least latent coercion, *and because we, and only we, could relatively easily reform it in the directions indicated.*'²⁷ The poor in the global South are, correspondingly, chiefly beneficiaries (albeit rights-holding ones) of the negative duties of those of affluent states: according to Pogge's formulation, 'I could honor [my negative duty] ... by working with others towards shielding the victims of injustice from the harms I help produce.'²⁸

3 The Poor as 'Subjects' in Global Justice Theorizing

Collapsing the questions of responsibility, capability, and suitability, Pogge thus assigns to institutions in the global North the role of primary agents of

24 Onora O'Neill briefly discusses transnational corporations and international non-governmental organizations as non-state actors, which she says may have the 'capabilities ... needed for the delivery of justice' in weak or failed states. See her 'Agents of Justice,' p. 198.

25 See Peter Uvin, *Human Rights and Development* (Bloomfield, CT.: Kumarian Press, 2004).

26 Cabrera and Pogge, 'Outreach, Impact, Collaboration,' p. 11.

27 Pogge, 'Human Rights and Human Responsibilities,' p. 175. Italics mine.

28 Pogge, *World Poverty*, p. 66.

justice.²⁹ He has, on occasion, addressed the question of the role of the poor in very general terms, but without acknowledging the particular contributions of poor political organizations or movements: ‘the global poor should also play a role in the realization of their human rights, but their capacity to do so is severely diminished by the harms inflicted upon them. This is why I have been working on a number of institutional reforms which could empower them.’³⁰ Pogge is not alone in overlooking the role of the poor and their efforts at political mobilization: much normative theorizing about severe poverty is marked by an absence of attention to the perspectives, aspirations, and political strategies of poor communities. Often referred to simply as the ‘world’s poor,’ the ‘global needy,’ or more recently, ‘the bottom billion,’³¹ the poor are also often assumed to have transparent, uniform requirements strictly reducible to material deprivation. This view contrasts sharply with the emerging account of poverty as multi-faceted powerlessness favored by many development practitioners and poverty activists. Typical in this regard is a comment by Larry Temkin, who writes in an article on global poverty that he ‘shall sidestep questions about how best to understand, define, or measure poverty ... *It will suffice for my purposes to employ a rough, intuitive, notion of the ‘needy’...*’³²

Arguments for poverty reduction that include details of institutional reforms, as does Pogge’s, are of course made easier if it is assumed that the poor’s requirements are stable and self-evident, rather than complex and shifting. Yet we have reason to doubt the accuracy of simplistic accounts of the poor and their needs: recent research on poverty that incorporates poor peoples’ own accounts of their situation reveals that a constant sense of vulnerability and lack of political voice are among the defining characteristics of poverty—for many, even more so than the experience of hunger. A three-volume study entitled *Voices of the Poor*, based on interviews with 60,000 poor individuals in over 50 countries, found that ‘Again and again, powerlessness seems to be at the core of a bad life.... Powerlessness is described as

29 As Neera Chandhoke notes, one unfortunate effect of Pogge’s prescriptions is ‘the construction of a ‘we’ versus ‘they’ that underlies his theory.’ See Chandhoke, ‘How Much Is Enough, Mr. Thomas? How Much Will Ever Be Enough?’, in *Thomas Pogge and his Critics*, ed. Alison Jaggar (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2010), p. 67.

30 Pogge, ‘Responses to the Critics,’ p. 209.

31 These terms are widely used by consequentialist and rights-based thinkers alike. The term ‘the bottom billion’ was introduced by Oxford development economist Paul Collier in *The Bottom Billion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

32 Larry Temkin, ‘Thinking about the Needy, Justice, and International Organizations,’ *The Journal of Ethics* 8 (2004), pp. 349–395, at p. 351. Italics mine.

the inability to control what happens, the inability to plan for the future, and the imperative of focusing on the present.’³³ Other aspects of life under poverty that participants stressed include the shame and humiliation which follow from extreme social and economic vulnerability, and a lack of opportunities to secure a means of livelihood for oneself and one’s family.³⁴ Many of those interviewed expressed despair at the arbitrary power of local state institutions that are able to thwart their efforts to access social services or earn a living. These dimensions of poverty are of course inextricably bound up with gross deficiencies in material needs—lack of food, assets, and work in particular³⁵—but, importantly, they are not reducible to them.

While there is an ever-increasing body of research on the lives, choices, and perspectives of the poor by sociologists and development economists,³⁶ this has had surprisingly little impact on philosophical writing on poverty—with the important exception of work by some development ethicists. The paucity of extended discussions within global justice theorizing about the social and political dimensions of poverty, as well as about the diversity and scope of the needs of those living in poor communities, cannot help but reinforce a generic picture of the poor as primarily recipients or beneficiaries—not agents—of justice. This representation of the poor as wholly lacking in capability is compounded by the lack of attention paid to examples of mobilization by the poor in developing countries, as noted above. Where philosophers do nod in the direction of the agency of the poor, it is often in a token way—for example, endorsing development policies that require the poor’s insertion into new labor markets and micro-credit schemes. These selective examples of the possible agency of the poor are frequently embedded within a de-politicized, privatized view of poverty that may ironically have the effect of ‘placing the burden of personal improvement and coping upon [poor] people’s own shoulders.’³⁷ The consequences of these mis-framings of poverty and the poor are far-reaching: if poverty is viewed strictly as a lack of material needs rather than

33 Deepa Narayan et al., *Voices of the Poor, vol. 2: Crying Out for Change* (Oxford: Oxford University Press and World Bank, 2002), p. 36.

34 Deepa Narayan et al., *Voices of the Poor, vol. 1: Can Anyone Hear Us?* (Oxford: Oxford University Press and World Bank, 2000).

35 Narayan, *Voices of the Poor, vol. 2*, p. 25.

36 See also Abhijit V. Banerjee and Esther Duflo, *Poor Economics: A Radical Rethinking of the Way to Fight Global Poverty* (New York: Public Affairs Books, 2011).

37 Asunción Lera St. Clair, ‘Global Poverty: Development Ethics Meets Global Justice,’ *Globalizations* 3 (2006), pp. 139–57, at p. 147.

also as a condition of economic and political powerlessness and marginalization, then solutions stressing growth-led development, modest reforms of the transnational financial system, and resource redistribution in the form of direct aid or humanitarian assistance will dominate the discussion of proposed solutions. This redistributive framework positions the governments, citizens, and institutions of the global North as the agents of justice. But if, in contrast, poverty is understood more broadly as a condition of social, economic, and political powerlessness that manifests as chronic vulnerability and disadvantage, then it *will matter* very much whether poor communities have a central role in determining their own needs and priorities, and in helping to devise reforms.

4 Poverty as Powerlessness

What difference might it make to Pogge's argument if he were to acknowledge the poor more explicitly as agents of justice, accounting for their actual and potential contributions to poverty reduction efforts? As suggested above, pro-poor activists in the global South as agents of justice are very differently placed than are transnational economic institutions and citizens in the global North, and can—and do—approach the issue of poverty largely as a problem of disempowerment. That is, poor movements and social solidarity networks generally frame poverty reduction as a political issue that is chiefly about lack of power, voice and representation, one which includes, but is not exhausted by, the distribution and use of resources at the local and national levels. Poor people's organizations in the global South, as recent commentators note, employ two strategies: 'strategies that are carried out by the poor in an attempt to change their poverty in terms of their resources and assets' and 'strategies through which the poor, or those representing the poor, seek to secure their interests by effecting change in the actions and policies of others and, in particular, bringing about change in public policy and its implementation.'³⁸ Advocacy for these latter reforms in turn emphasizes the goal of empowering the poor on multiple levels—social, legal, political, and economic. By contrast, while Pogge asserts that his proposals for the reform of the global economic system also require the participation of citizens of poor countries, he has in mind affluent persons in those states, not the poor:

38 Engberg-Pedersen and Webster, 'Introduction to Political Space,' p. 7.

I am not making the achievement of global justice the exclusive business of people in the affluent countries. For instance, my proposals for the reform of the resource and borrowing privileges ... requires efforts by conscientious citizens and politicians of resource-rich but economically poor countries....Affluent citizens in poor countries should think about their own responsibilities to use what powers they have within imperfect political processes to achieve a more just society.³⁹

While connecting agency with demonstrated capability (and power) is sound in principle, this view is too quick to assume that powerful institutions and individuals are the only—and best—agents of change where poverty and underdevelopment are concerned.⁴⁰ While it is not surprising that Utilitarian and virtue-ethical discussions of poverty, which cite need and suffering as the justification for general duties of aid, should make this move, there is no necessary reason why agent-centered approaches should do so: they can, I suggest, readily include the poor within their accounts of which agents can, with appropriate resources and opportunities, develop, participate in, and even direct poverty-reduction strategies. There are obvious points of intersection between a pro-poor/poor-empowerment approach and the agent-centered view. Most broadly, the deontological underpinnings of the agent-centered perspective shares with the poor-empowerment approach the goal of making it possible for the poor to lead self-directed lives free from exploitation and oppression. Activism by the poor in the global South, accordingly, frequently targets unjust policies and institutions that prevent them from earning a viable livelihood (such as farmers' protests against rich countries' agricultural subsidies), a phenomenon consistent with Pogge's emphasis on the need to reform unjust economic structures that penalize the poor.

Another concrete point of intersection lies in the use of the human rights framework to defend the rights of the poor to social and economic resources and opportunities. Increasingly, international non-governmental organizations (INGOs) wage political and legal campaigns using the language of social and economic human rights. The human rights framework that Pogge believes

39 Thomas Pogge, 'Responses to the Critics,' *Thomas Pogge and His Critics*, ed. Alison Jaggar (Cambridge, MA: Polity Press, 2010), p. 209.

40 This criticism is also rightly directed at the Utilitarian-style 'shallow pond' thinking represented by Peter Singer's work on poverty. See Scott Wisor, 'Against Shallow Ponds: An Argument Against Singer's Approach to Global Poverty,' *Journal of Global Ethics* 7 (2011), pp. 19–32.

is the best tool for motivating action against poverty could arguably be strengthened by recognizing the ways in which anti-poverty activists appeal to human rights to food, housing, and health. His argument also dovetails with the idea of a 'right to development,'⁴¹ and the 'rights-based approach to development' more generally, which have become prominent in the work of development organizations. These human rights-based advocacy strategies and development approaches to meeting basic needs stress poor empowerment both as a core goal of development and as a means of achieving it; organizations that adopt this approach believe that:

Good policies cannot on their own deliver empowerment of the poor, with the capacity and ability to negotiate with the non-poor in their own societies, and with those 'assisting' them, based on discourse and frameworks that they understand. This is the necessary aspect of 'agency' that would enable the poor both to participate in the policy transformations, as claimed in the emerging global frameworks of pro-poor development, and also to achieve sustainable benefits from this participation. This, however, requires 'political agency' on the side of the poor themselves at the interface with those who assist them because both policy-making and policy implementation are political processes.⁴²

While Pogge shares many of the concerns that motivate the use of human rights by these civil society activists, there are two goals, empowerment and greater equality, that receive much less attention in his work. The rights-based approach to development now employed by many development practitioners and activists insists that economic reforms should lead to significantly greater *economic equality* worldwide, and that poverty reduction processes should seek to directly empower the poor. Pogge apparently views these heady goals as separable from (and more ambitious than) his own proposals for reforming global economic structures, which aim to fulfill what he sees as the core human rights of the poor.⁴³ He is, of course, clearly aware of the pervasive impact that North-South economic and political inequalities have on the populations

41 For a comprehensive history of this right as an instrument in international law, and its increasing currency in development programs, see Arjun Sengupta, 'On the Theory and Practice of the Right to Development,' *Human Rights Quarterly* 24 (2002), pp. 837–89.

42 Fletcher Tembo, 'NGDOS' Role in Building Poor People's Capacity to Benefit from Globalization,' *Journal of International Development* 16 (2004), pp. 1023–37, at p. 1024.

43 Pogge, 'Responses to the Critics,' pp. 208.

of countries in the global South, and suggests mechanisms that he thinks may help to shift the global balance of political power;⁴⁴ however, he has consistently sought to reassure readers that his proposed reforms ‘would entail only slight reductions in the incomes of the affluent,’ rather than any radical challenge to global inequality.⁴⁵ Moreover, in contrast to the perspective of development ethics and rights-based views of development, Pogge does not cite the poor’s political empowerment as an important feature of processes of poverty reduction.⁴⁶ Compare the analysis of a proponent of rights-based development, Arjun Sengupta:

According to the right to development, considerations of equity and justice would determine the whole structure of development. For example, poverty has to be reduced by empowering the poor and uplifting the poorest regions. The structure of production has to be adjusted to produce these outcomes through development policy. ... This development process has to be participatory. The decisions will have to be taken with the full involvement of the beneficiaries.⁴⁷

Pogge does not pitch his argument at the level of local or national development and poverty reduction (unlike, say, Sen), and so it is perhaps not quite fair to expect him to include an analysis of the role of anti-poverty movements in civil society, or participatory and poor-centered development and poverty alleviation strategies. But insofar as he conceives of poverty reduction as a process by which those responsible take up their duties to reform the global financial system, Pogge distances himself from other human rights proponents who insist that tackling the multifaceted and interlocking social, economic, and political powerlessness of the poor is the most effective way to combat poverty. The latter insist that meaningful transformation will require that anti-poverty and development strategies target local and global structures of inequality, as well as practices of discrimination and political marginalization; it will also require that the empowerment of those most vulnerable to poverty be treated as the goal of development and poverty reduction initiatives.⁴⁸

44 Thomas Pogge, ‘Real World Justice,’ *The Journal of Ethics* 9 (2005), pp. 29–53 and Pogge, *World Poverty*, pp. 122–23.

45 Pogge, *Politics as Usual*, p. 31.

46 The empowerment of the poor is not a theme explicitly taken up by Pogge: no entry for ‘empowerment’ is to be found in the index of Pogge’s *World Poverty* or *Politics as Usual*.

47 Sengupta, ‘On the Theory and Practice of the Right to Development,’ p. 850.

48 See for example Uvin, *Human Rights and Development*, pp. 175–182.

While Pogge is surely right that global institutional reforms are a crucial precondition for significant and lasting poverty reduction—a claim well borne out by his discussion of vastly unjust trade regulations and tariffs, international borrowing privileges, and punitive debt structuring—such reforms alone will not automatically shift resources, much less power, into the hands of the destitute. Pogge clearly recognizes this: it is critical to the success of one of his main proposals for economic reform, the global resource dividend (GRD), that the anticipated proceeds (approximately 1% of the global product) be used to ‘improve the nutrition, medical care, and sanitary conditions of the poor.’⁴⁹ However, beyond insisting that the GRD ‘re-channels money from the consumers of resources to the global poor,’ and that it is not ‘a form of aid,’⁵⁰ Pogge says little about the political form that poverty reduction initiatives should take, or of the role of the poor in these.

The human rights framework that underpins Pogge’s defense of moral duties of poverty relief might conceivably anchor additional—and different—duties to support the social, economic, and political empowerment of the poor. Since our human rights obligations with respect to poverty are initially discharged at the level of national institutions,⁵¹ his approach could incorporate some of the more innovative poverty reduction programs that have been implemented in recent years in poor countries, partly in response to poor people’s advocacy. For example, ‘social protection’ schemes, such as minimum basic income programs and cash transfers to the poor, have been introduced in a number of Latin American countries, where they have reportedly made a significant impact in reducing chronic poverty. Some examples of these include Mexico’s ‘Oportunidades’ program and Brazil’s ‘Bolsa Familia,’ both of which have successfully targeted the lowest-income families.⁵² Nor are social protection schemes in any way at odds with the structural reforms of the global financial system that Pogge urges; indeed, responsibility for institutional reform might be understood as encompassing financial support for popular national social protection schemes, in line with Pogge’s compensatory scheme for global justice.⁵³

49 Pogge, *World Poverty*, p. 203.

50 Pogge, ‘Real World Justice,’ p. 52.

51 Pogge, ‘Severe Poverty as a Human Rights Violation,’ in *Freedom from Poverty as a Human Right*, ed. T. Pogge (Oxford: Oxford University Press and UNESCO, 2007), p. 29.

52 See <http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2011/01/03/to-beat-back-poverty-pay-the-poor/>.

53 Pogge suggests that in addition to bearing responsibility for reforming the global financial system, affluent states bear ‘some costs of compensating or harms done—for example by helping fund basic health facilities, vaccination programs, basic schooling...’ See Pogge, ‘Severe Poverty,’ p. 28.

To fully include the poor as agents rather than mere recipients or beneficiaries of justice in poverty reduction efforts, however, Pogge would need to acknowledge the critical role that pro-poor activism and poor-centered political initiatives must play in these efforts. He would also need to consider new and different political roles for (reformed) global economic actors, governments, and NGOs: helping to facilitate legal reforms that remove restrictions on political organizing by the poor; advocating the removal of barriers to poor economic participation; working to implement legal reforms that improve labor standards, especially of contract labor; and advocating government programs known to support the capabilities of the poor. But while the democratic impulse of Pogge's approach to global justice is clear—he has long argued for a 'human right of political participation'⁵⁴—reforms that aim to politically empower the poor do not feature in his argument. That Pogge's 'institutional cosmopolitanism' would, if implemented, reduce severe poverty in developing countries, seems likely; what is less apparent is whether or how it could dramatically reduce the deep economic and political power inequalities between the global North and South (or between the rich and poor within individual states). Indeed, Pogge's reassurances to the affluent make plain that he views serious poverty reduction as fully compatible with the continuation of global capitalism in only a modified form.⁵⁵ This is emphatically *not* the position of global civil society networks that target the negative effects of globalization, such as the World Social Forum—recently morphed into the Global Call For Action—and its regional affiliates.

Civil society groups in the global South working to transform economic and political arrangements are in one sense an illustration of Pogge's astute argument for a vertical dispersion of political authority, which he sees as a necessary tool for reducing poverty. From the seizure of land by the rural poor in Mozambique to the successful efforts of peasant farmers and their co-ops

54 See Pogge, 'Cosmopolitanism and Sovereignty,' *Ethics* 102 (1992): pp. 48–75, and Pogge, *World Poverty*, chapters 6 and 7.

55 Pogge, 'Severe Poverty,' p. 30 and *Politics as Usual*, p. 31 (see also Pogge, 'Responses to the Critics,' p. 208). For reasons why we should doubt that poverty can be eradicated in the context of the current system of global capitalism, see David Schweickart, 'Global Poverty: Alternative perspectives on what we should do—and why,' *Journal of Social Philosophy* 39 (2008), pp. 471–91, Andrew Hurrell, 'Global Inequality and International Institutions,' *Metaphilosophy* 32 (2001), pp. 34–57, and Kai Nielsen, 'Global Justice and the Imperatives of Capitalism,' *The Journal of Philosophy* 4 (1983), pp. 608–10.

in Bolivia to gain control of local government institutions using the 1994 Bolivian Law of Popular Participation,⁵⁶ pro-poor civil society groups and movements aim not only to change policy but to lay claim to democratic power. Although these are not examples of the formal political units that might comprise Pogge's cosmopolitan vision of multiple layers of political units (according to his vision of dispersed sovereignty), they nonetheless give expression to the principle of democracy that informs it: as Pogge writes, 'Persons have a right to an institutional order under which those significantly and legitimately affected by a political decision have a roughly equal opportunity to influence the making of ... decision(s) ... Such a human right to political participation also supports greater local autonomy in matters of purely local concern than exists in most current states.'⁵⁷ Rethinking the scope and role of agents of poverty reduction, as we can see, thus renders Pogge's view more consistent with the democratic foundations of his own approach to global justice.⁵⁸

5 The Poor as Agents of Justice?

The political analysis that pro-poor solidarity networks and movements bring to bear on poverty issues adds importantly to our understanding of the structures that perpetuate poverty. For instance, some women's solidarity networks, such as the aforementioned WIEGO, or the Asia-based network DAWN (Development Alternatives with Women for a New Era), direct their advocacy efforts not only at economic practices and policies that disadvantage women but more broadly at the social, cultural, legal, and political structures that compound their economic disempowerment.⁵⁹ It is thus no surprise

56 Astrid Blom, 'Ambiguous Political Space: Chiefs, Land and the Poor in Rural Mozambique,' *In the Name of the Poor: Contesting Political Space for Poverty Reduction*, ed. N. Webster and L. Engberg-Pedersen (London and New York: Zed Books, 2002), pp. 104–128, and Anne Marie Ejdesgaard Jeppesen, 'Reading the Bolivian Landscape of Exclusion and Inclusion: The Law of Popular Participation,' also in *In the Name of the Poor*, pp. 30–51.

57 Thomas Pogge, 'Cosmopolitanism and Sovereignty,' *Ethics* 103 (1992), pp. 48–75, at pp. 63–64.

58 Pogge, 'Cosmopolitanism and Sovereignty.'

59 An organizing principle of DAWN's work is that development must begin from dialog with the poor and must centrally involve people—especially women—at the local level. For a discussion of the work of this group, see Ann-Cathrin Jarl, *In Justice: Women and Global Economics* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), pp. 37–39.

that the goal of empowerment in all of these spheres has emerged as a key theme in pro-poor social and political mobilization. As the author of a recent book chronicling the evolution of Oxfam's position on global poverty suggests,

A holistic effort to reduce vulnerability should be based on supporting and strengthening the self-organisation of poor people, and providing protection, whether at state or international level—what we term 'human security'.... In [certain] areas, powerful governments and international institutions should do *less*: for example, refraining from imposing particular economic policies on developing countries, and recognizing that effective states and active citizens are the main actors in the drama of development and must be allowed to experiment, fail, learn, and succeed.⁶⁰

On this more circumspect and cautious view of the role of actors in the global North in directing initiatives to reduce global poverty and inequality, redistributive justice—understood as humanitarian aid and development assistance—is no replacement for the slow and admittedly difficult process of building the capacities of communities for self-directed development and governance. This is not to shift the responsibility for poverty reduction onto the shoulders of the poor, in the sense of holding them accountable for bad choices that have somehow contributed to their own poverty. Here my account differs from that of David Miller, who also stresses the importance of recognizing the agency of poor, yet who focuses on the personal and collective choices that affect their circumstances rather than the social and political role of the poor that I emphasize. For Miller, the poor need to be seen not only as 'needy and vulnerable' but also as 'responsible agents' whose decisions result in 'gains and losses' with regards to their own well-being.⁶¹ Though I do not deny that this is an aspect of the agency of the poor, it strikes me as the least important dimension in a political account of the potential role of the poor in poverty reduction efforts—and one that carries the troubling suggestion that the poor can, in some contexts, be held responsible for their poverty. By contrast, I argue that the moral agency of the poor derives from their capacity to act in response to concerns for the welfare or survival of those in dire need—including

60 See Duncan Green, *From Poverty to Power* (Rugby, U.K.: Practical Action Publishing, for Oxfam International, 2008), pp. 14–5.

61 David Miller, *National Responsibility and Global Justice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), especially chapters 1 and 9.

themselves and their families—and their political agency similarly stems from considerations of solidarity with their communities or others struggling in poverty. On my account of the prospective agency of the poor, it is essential to support the actual work of poor movements and advocacy groups, and to create opportunities for them to influence local, national, and global poverty reduction strategies.

According to the poor-centered approaches advocated by development ethicists and practitioners as well as many anti-poverty advocates, the perspectives and agency of the poor come into play both when considering the *ends* of development and poverty reduction as well as the *means*. The emerging view of development as an expansion of people's capabilities and well-being more generally (a view that Sen has done much to advance) requires that a wide range of factors—not just income—be considered when establishing development goals and strategies. While there is no precise consensus on what well-being consists of, even amongst development ethicists,⁶² the value of empowerment is widely considered to be a key element to successful development. Denis Goulet, regarded as a pioneer in the field of development ethics, wrote 40 years ago of 'the aspiration ... to achieve dignity and become an agent of one's own development.'⁶³ Today, many proponents of development practices urge innovative, empowerment-based strategies for both poverty reduction and socio-economic development. In states with at least minimal infrastructure, participatory budgeting (implemented first in Brazil, but since adopted in numerous cities around the world), the idea of 'citizen report cards,' and social protection schemes are examples of strategies that have been proposed and successfully implemented.⁶⁴ In poor countries lacking basic social and economic institutions, development initiatives and poverty alleviation projects can still be devised with the goal of respecting and including the poor—for example, by encouraging the participation of communities in setting specific development targets and enlisting their assistance in the subsequent monitoring of the success of projects.⁶⁵

What distinguishes 'pro-poor' approaches to poverty reduction and development from those proposed by mainstream global justice theorists is thus

62 Dower, 'The Nature and Scope of Development Ethics,' pp. 186.

63 Denis Goulet, *The Cruel Choice* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1985), p. 53.

64 Jay Drydyk, 'Durable empowerment,' *Journal of Global Ethics* 4 (2008), pp. 231–45, at p. 231, and Armando Barrientos, 'Social Protection and Poverty,' *Social Policy and Development*, paper no. 42 (United Nations Research Institute for Social Development, 2010).

65 Siby George, 'Birth of the Subject: the Ethics of Monitoring Development Programmes,' *Journal of Global Ethics* 4 (2008), pp. 23–43.

their central focus on the participation and empowerment of the poor as core values and goals. Although somewhat diffuse in meaning, when applied to development practices and projects targeting poverty, a poor-centered, empowerment-based perspective essentially demands not just that development aims to reduce the misery of the poor, but that it helps to empower them. It also demands that the very process of development *be* empowering.⁶⁶ Empowerment is the condition of exercising one's capabilities for making and enacting decisions that centrally affect one's life; it frequently takes a collective form, and cannot be merely bestowed or given by others (i.e., it must be developed). In contrast to approaches to global injustice that focus mainly on the humanitarian role and duties of powerful agents, an empowerment-focused development ethics (or anti-poverty politics) places the emphasis on the participation of poor communities in both devising and directing strategies for poverty reduction, without which genuine empowerment is not possible.

To the extent that Pogge urges that it is a central duty of citizens and institutions of the global North to challenge unjust global economic rules and structures, he is concerned with the disempowering consequences of these institutions. But the negative duties he envisages for these powerful agents do not fundamentally question their envisaged hegemonic position in directing efforts to bring about global justice, much less demand the equal participation of the poor in this process. Nor do these prescriptions for over-arching economic reform necessarily strike at many of the national and local arrangements that deeply impair the agency of the poor: the reform of global economic institutions with a view to redistributing wealth does not require the transformation of the legal, political, and cultural structures that reinforce the vulnerability of the poor (such as family law codes that disadvantage women, or discriminatory land ownership rules). When the empowerment of the poor, broadly speaking, is taken to be the central aim of poverty reduction, the reform of these systems—which, admittedly, outsiders may have little influence over—is no longer seen as an issue peripheral to poverty. As Drydyk has argued, if it is important that empowerment be not just a latent capacity that one has but rather one that is actually exercised to achieve what one needs,⁶⁷ then all systems and structures—not just economic ones—that undercut the agency of the poor require close scrutiny. Reforms to legal, cultural, and political systems in poor countries that genuinely empower individuals will usually require the input and often the

66 Drydyk, 'Durable Empowerment,' p. 231.

67 Drydyk, 'Durable empowerment,' p. 239.

political advocacy of the disempowered—another reason why the poor ought to be seen as vital ‘agents of justice.’⁶⁸

Pogge’s human rights-based approach to poverty, as noted earlier, has the potential to highlight the agency of the poor as *rights-holders*, since the negative duties foregrounded by his argument for poverty reduction are precisely correlative to the social and economic human rights of the global poor. However, without giving more credence to the voices and struggles of the poor themselves, including transnational human rights movements aimed at securing social and economic human rights, the poor appear more as powerless persons awaiting the fulfillment of their human rights by external agents. Actors in the global North—such as INGOs—can certainly help to support poor people’s organizations and movements without necessarily dominating the agenda or direction of such groups.⁶⁹ Moreover, as is evident from the use of a human rights framework by development practitioners, rights discourse need not diminish the agency of those claiming their rights: by demanding fulfillment of their social and economic human rights, the poor and their advocates implicate national governments and transnational institutions in failing to uphold their social and economic entitlements, but do not do so as passive recipients of such rights.

6 Conclusion

This article has raised questions about the ramifications of philosophical arguments that emphasize duties over needs, and which seek to assign responsibility for alleviating poverty to particular agents of justice. Pogge’s argument, as we have seen, pivots on an account of the ‘negative and intermediate duties towards the poor’ that those in the affluent global North violate every day,⁷⁰

68 This might be taken as an invitation to unwanted intervention in the legal and social systems and practices of developing states by outsiders, as Scott Wisor has warned (personal communication). However, the reform of practices that systematically disadvantage vulnerable members of societies is often a goal of grassroots NGOs, and it is possible to give support to the legal and political efforts of these groups without risking the strong charge of imperialism.

69 Mick Moore suggests that external donors should play an *‘indirect and parametric, rather than direct and interventionist’* role in supporting poor people’s organizing. See his ‘Empowerment at Last?’, *Journal of International Development* 13 (2001), pp. 321–29, at p. 325.

70 Pogge, ‘Real World Justice,’ p. 53.

and as such is most concerned with the moral agency of those *failing* to uphold their duties. But by neglecting to disaggregate the question of responsibility for perpetuating poverty from the question of whose interests and voices should shape poverty-reduction and development initiatives, Pogge's approach ironically risks expressing a fatalism about the vast power inequalities between the global North and South.⁷¹ Framing the problem of global poverty as a failure of citizens and institutions of affluent states to take up their rightful moral obligations implies that it is *only* through their actions and initiatives that dire poverty can be alleviated. In so doing, it positions institutions and individuals of the global North both as the primary moral agents and the catalyst for development, and correspondingly treats the poor as victims of those who fail to fulfill their negative duties. On this framing, the designated moral agents are specifically persons and entities *not* suffering from poverty but rather responsible for contributing to that poverty, or thought to be capable of alleviating it (or both). By contrast, the would-be recipients are construed as mere recipients of justice, rather than as potential agents of change.

This problematic agent/subject dichotomy, which I have suggested is reflective of much global justice theorizing (not just Pogge's work), fails to challenge the power relations between the putative subjects and agents of global justice—or alternatively, victim/benefactor—in discussions about the causes of global poverty and its remedies. Making the connections between poverty and affluence explicit and exploring more deeply the causes of underdevelopment in the global South—as Pogge, in particular, has done—helps to mitigate the picture of the poor as mere unlucky, needy, would-be recipients of aid. This is not enough, however, for this picture of global poverty is flawed in a further way: without a more complex picture of the needs and interests of the poor, and consideration of the perspectives and agency of the poor themselves, theorists of global justice risk mis-describing the priorities of different poor communities by overlooking dimensions that individuals widely report as central to their experience of poverty, such as powerlessness and lack of voice in their daily lives.⁷²

In the absence of adequate attention to perspectives and needs of the putative recipients of poverty reduction efforts, a focus on agents' duties and capabilities risks marginalizing the role of poor communities in devising and implementing solutions to chronic poverty and inequality. By failing to see the poor as actual or prospective agents of justice, such approaches risk ignoring

71 Pogge, *World Poverty*, p. 185.

72 Narayan, ed., *Voices of the Poor*, vol. 1 and Narayan et al., ed., *Voices of the Poor*, vol. 2.

the root political causes of, and best remedies for, entrenched poverty. Many development ethicists and practitioners, poverty analysts (including development economists), and civil society activists now agree that development and poverty reduction work better when poor communities play a central role in defining their own needs and priorities, and when the resulting strategies actively engage and develop their capacities. Once we move beyond an over-simple view of poverty as strictly a lack of means of subsistence and come to acknowledge the key demand for social and economic self-determination and empowerment of the poor, it is no longer clear that institutions in the global North are in all instances the best catalysts for economic transformation.

The more complex view of poverty reduction, and expanded account of the agents of change, defended here in no way absolve affluent states from their obligations regarding poverty. Instead, it points to a different and more calibrated set of responsibilities on the part of institutions and individuals in the global North, beyond the familiar anti-poverty solutions of humanitarian aid and top-down development assistance, or even Pogge's prescriptions for global economic reform. These new responsibilities may require, for example, that institutions and individuals in the global North support poor communities' struggles for legal and economic reforms; or they may require that they help to facilitate more effective collaborations between poor communities and local and international NGOs. Yet at other times, it may be best if agents in affluent countries step out of the way and refrain from blocking the efforts of poor movements to mobilize on behalf of their own interests. Despite their obvious marginalization, these groups have strived, with some success, to bring about legal and economic reforms that target structures that perpetuate poverty, and global justice theorists ought to recognize these vital contributions.

These proposed amendments to the agent-centered approach suggest a subtle, but I hope significant, reorientation of philosophical thinking about the remedies to poverty and inequality in the global South, one that ultimately aims to clear a space for more critical and skeptical appraisals of growth-led models of development and aid practices tied to neoliberal restructuring (such as privatization and marketization). More broadly, I have suggested that poverty reduction should be embedded within the larger project of poor empowerment, and ultimately, of the dismantling of those structures—legal, cultural, social, as well as economic—that undermine their agency. This more expansive approach to the problems of global poverty and injustice is well complemented by the human rights-based approach to social and economic development that has emerged in recent years as the favored approach by

leading development theorists and practitioners. It is vital, however, that the 'subject' of those rights be treated not as needy beneficiaries, but rather as persons with valid claims to social protection as well as to full economic and political enfranchisement.⁷³

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