

THERE IS NO THEM, JUST US

Ending the system of poverty for us all



OXFAM

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The world's progress in overcoming poverty has always been fragile, and it risks going backwards in the face of crises unless we act to tackle the systemic nature of poverty. This means tackling structural injustices, but also power imbalances and the capture of politics, knowledge and narratives.

In place of this system of poverty, we need to imagine, collaborate, experiment and convene to find a new system based on justice and regeneration. One of the tightest shackles holding us back from this endeavour is the notion of 'us' and 'them', which destroys the global solidarity we need.

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For further information on the issues raised in this paper please email policyandpractice@oxfam.org.uk

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The lie of development

In a world buffeted by crises – from climate to conflict to cost of living – we are finding out just how fragile the world’s progress on overcoming poverty really is. Poverty in the lowest-income countries is increasing to higher rates than it was before the pandemic.¹ Little progress has been made in reducing hunger on a global scale since 2015 and undernourishment is on the rise.² Inequality between the Global North and Global South has grown for the first time in 25 years and across the world there is a rollback in rights for women and girls.^{3,4}

Nor are higher income countries immune from persistent poverty and inequality. The Joseph Rowntree Foundation 2024 report on UK poverty found that poverty rates have returned to pre-pandemic levels. Nearly half of those found to be in ‘very deep’ poverty had an income far below the standard poverty line.⁵

If we have hope of meeting the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), or indeed if we have hope of a future that any of us want on a planet that can sustain us and future generations, then more of the same approach – characterized as ‘poverty management’ – cannot be the answer. Incremental policy changes, project-led development programmes with short term approaches and charitable framings of ‘us’ leading ‘them’ to a destination of being ‘developed’ are all approaches that need to be reassessed. We need to be bold in pressing to end poverty, not just managing it from crisis to crisis.

The injustice that perpetuates poverty and makes any progress fragile has always been observable: from growing extreme inequality to increasing climate threat, to structural racism, neo-colonialism and gender discrimination. Oxfam has been one of the voices warning about the rise of extreme inequality for a decade, and we first wrote with concern about the impacts of a changing climate on people in 1983. We have echoed the voices of many who recognize the structural injustices that perpetuate poverty, from trade policy to tax, and we have been a voice concerned with women’s rights for decades.

However, we have also been guilty ourselves of perpetuating harmful narratives and replicating inequities of resources, power, dignity and knowledge that feed systemic poverty.

In this report we lay out to our supporters, allies, partners and other stakeholders some of the fundamental thinking that will guide our work from now on. We hope that this can be an approach shared with all those working to address poverty and development. We recognize that we would not be writing this if we in turn were not influenced by brave thinkers, movements, partners and allies across the world from whom we learn.

We recognize that:

- Poverty is not just structural - a result of policies and procedures that create it; it is also systemic. This means that those policies and procedures are fused together by narratives and control of knowledge that reproduce power and privilege.
- We must end the lie of 'us' and 'them'. This comes across in charitable framings of 'white saviourism' rather than of solidarity. But it also appears in the lie of scarcity – the idea that there is not enough to go around – which pits people against each other (UK poverty or global poverty? Climate or development?) Rather, we live in a world of unprecedented wealth with a problem of gross inequality.
- Poverty is very much the same problem as inequality, with extreme want and extreme wealth being two sides of the same coin, and with poverty felt more deeply because of race, class, gender, disability or sexuality. Poverty is the result of political and economic systems that create winners and losers and then allow the winners to write the rules.
- Humanitarian crises and conflict are not separate phenomena from systemic poverty and inequality. We cannot have a 'humanitarian' approach separate from an approach to combating systemic poverty and challenging injustice. The catastrophic suffering inflicted on the people of Gaza in the most recent escalation of violence in Palestine and Israel is the starkest example of fragility born of deep-rooted, protracted and prolonged injustice. It has exposed double standards when it comes to rights and protections, where 'they' are seen to deserve less safety than 'us'.

Most fundamentally, we need a shift that sees the very project of 'development' not as being one of rich industrialized countries helping 'developing' countries to move along some path of progress. Rather it is about dismantling a centuries-old process of accumulation, colonialism and under-development imposed by the Global North on the Global South, a process characterized by racism and patriarchy at every step.

Neither should we ignore the very real poverty and inequality in high income countries, a poverty which has many of the same systemic roots. It is not about developing 'them'. It is about dismantling the system of poverty for us all.

The system of poverty

Decades after the formal end of empires, there remain many examples of resources flowing systematically from the global majority world to the global minority of rich industrialized countries: from unfair terms of trade and exploitative value chains to debt repayments, tax dodging and withholding of development finance.

According to one estimate, in 2012 (the last year of recorded data) low-income countries received just over \$2 trillion in aid, investment and income, but in the same year \$5 trillion flowed out – a difference of \$3 trillion.⁶ To put this into perspective, Oxfam calculates that it would take roughly \$3.9 trillion a year to fill financing gaps in health, education and social protection and to tackle the climate crisis in low- and middle-income countries.⁷

Structural and systemic inequities between countries are vast. But to understand the widening gap between some of the very richest people in the world and those living in poverty we must also look at a vital set of mechanisms at national level. They demonstrate a politics and economics that don't just create poverty in low income countries, but create poverty in high income countries too. All of us are affected, to greater or lesser extents.

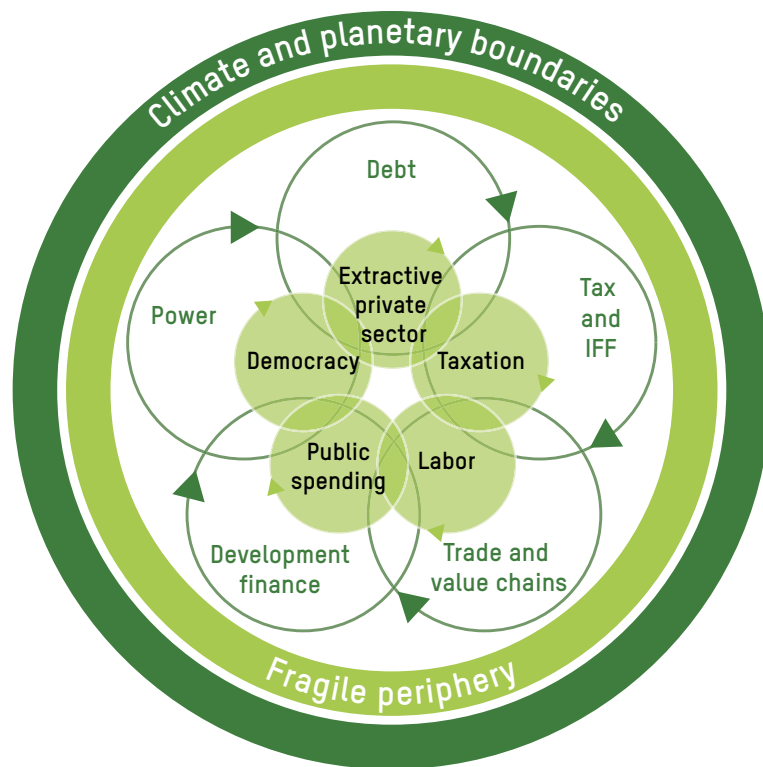
Oxfam's Commitment to Inequality Index has charted policy decisions from over 160 governments across many of the policy areas that have the greatest impact on inequality – from the design of tax policy to labor laws and practices to investment in public services.⁸ The results differ from place to place, but the trends are clear. Since 1980, inequality within countries has doubled.⁹

'At current rates, it will take 230 years to end poverty, but we could have our first trillionaire in 10 years.'

This 'system' of extraction at global and national levels is illustrated in the figure below, with resources circulating ever inwards towards the world's richest people. Since 2020, the richest five men in the world have doubled their fortunes.

During the same period, almost five billion people globally have become poorer. At current rates, it will take 230 years to end poverty, but we could have our first trillionaire in 10 years.¹⁰

It is worth noting how capital can move freely, both legitimately and illegitimately, flowing directly from the lowest-income parts of the world to the richest people in the wealthiest countries. Contrast this with the ever-increasing billions spent on security, defence and border control to prevent people from doing the same.¹¹ Capital seeks return and is celebrated as foreign direct investment. People seek a future and are called illegal immigrants.



The system of poverty, showing how it is constrained by the climate crisis and fragility around the system of wealth concentration.

Proponents of the current system and the status quo tend to claim that this is the only viable option. The argument is that incremental improvements – through growth that is eventually shared – get results and maintain stability, even if those ‘results’ are vastly unequal.

This has always been a flawed argument. Growth in gross domestic product (GDP) is a completely inadequate measure of human progress, and it is very possible to have growth in GDP alongside increases in absolute poverty.¹²

But now we realize that the inefficiency of this system is not just undesirable for those who are exploited by it: it also makes ending poverty impossible. On current trends, it would require global GDP to increase to 175 times its present size in order to get everyone to anything like an acceptable standard of living.¹³ This is impossible without destroying every planetary resource and creating a climate catastrophe.¹⁴

Furthermore, the extreme inequality and precarity created by this systemic poverty are reducing the capacities of communities and governments at all levels to cope, and are contributing to the conflicts that will ensure poverty persists. The OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development) predicts that, by 2030, 86% of those people living in extreme poverty will be in fragile contexts.¹⁵

Our economies are not just creating inequality and perpetuating poverty. They are creating the climate crisis and environmental damage that make it impossible - if we remain on the current path - to end poverty for all on a planet that can sustain us. And they are contributing to the precarity and fragility that erode the capacities and governance we need to end poverty.

How does the system persist?

Addressing these barriers to overcoming poverty will be impossible without a realization that they are not just structural but systemic. This means that this structure is fused together by power and the replication of power dynamics. When we talk about the injustice of inequality, it is not just that there are obscenities of wealth alongside tragedies of poverty. Extreme wealth creates and reinforces poverty.

Crucial here is the issue of ‘political capture’, which ensures that democratic governance and citizen participation – the most powerful tools we have to reverse the direction of travel in this system – are too often blunted by the power of today’s economic winners. We can see this in terms of outright discrimination, exclusivity of decision-making spaces or the money involved in lobbying.

But there are other ‘captures’ by the powerful in this system: the capture of knowledge, for instance, and the sidelining of other ways of thinking or methods of knowing. Crucial too are the creation, capture and use of narratives. From racist ideas to narratives about what is ‘women’s work’ to the idea of meritocracy: stories are extremely powerful tools in directing behaviour.

Finally there is violence, and it should not be underestimated to what extent the system of poverty is backed up by recourse to this. This is the case from a global level (in a precarious world, military spending had, by April 2023, reached an all-time high of \$2.24 trillion a year)¹⁶ through to power imbalances in workplaces, public spaces and homes. It is still the case that one in three women will experience domestic violence or sexual violence in her lifetime. Data around violence against transgender and gender non-conforming people is limited, but research shows that across continents, transgender people are more likely to face violence than cisgender people.^{17, 18, 19, 20}



Hilda, an activist in Kampala, Uganda, raises awareness amongst students about fighting racism, gender issues and the climate crisis.

Credit: Emmanuel Museruka / Oxfam

Imagining the system we want

Turning this system around will be the task of a generation. It is place-making on a global scale, requiring us to imagine differently, tell different stories, measure and value different things, organize ourselves differently and listen to different sources of knowledge. It will require us to combat power more than it will require us to combat poverty.

We don't have to design this system perfectly from the start. It's not a 10-point-plan or even a 'mission'. And we almost certainly shouldn't design it at some big summit or global moment. The how is as important as the what, as the how is the practice of communally imagining, experimenting, sharing and knitting together the new system.

As to what that might look like, there are many good thoughts already circulating that we can draw on to propose a very broad pathway.

1 Start with the individual – be true collaborators

Practitioners and scholars of racial justice and feminism promote journeys of self-learning to help individuals understand how they fit into systems of structural inequality. In the same way, we should consider our own role in a system of poverty. What is vital is that this is not a process to increase individualism: it is an individual journey into the communal and relational.

2 Invest in the architecture of change

Change is a long-term business and the ideas and energy that we find as individuals need a home. Investing in architecture – dispersed and connected, not centralized – is vital for embodying change. This could mean creating new institutions or adapting old ones. It means physical spaces, virtual spaces and new forums for collaboration.

3 Experiment with alternatives

At whatever scale, the world needs good examples of radically reimagined economic and social life: whether in the family²¹ or local community schemes,²² whether bold ideas at local government level or alternative business structures²³ and ways to measure human progress. Radical imagination is a skill we need to invest in.

4 Greater national equality through greater democracy

Some of our best interventions against inequality are already here – free quality public services, progressive taxation and labor rights to ensure decent, well-paid jobs. The inadequacy or restriction of these things in too many places is a political choice, and one that we must consistently call out. We need more democratic decision-making, more participation and better representation against elite power and political capture.

5 New global conversations

At the global level we need institutions that are capable of encouraging new conversations. Conversations about reparative justice and global reparations, for instance (the design of the new Loss and Damage Fund²⁴ is a good place to start), or a concerted effort to tackle the challenge of multinational companies dodging tax, such as a world tax body.²⁵ The G20 should take seriously the idea of coordinated wealth taxes. We need reform and radical reimagining of the global financial architecture so that it explicitly aims to end extreme inequality.

The most important thing is to avoid 'all or nothing' thinking. Every change that we can make in our neighbourhoods or cities, businesses or workplaces is a step in the right direction. And it could unleash change across the system further than we can imagine.

Oxfam GB's priority responses

Usually in this part of a report, Oxfam issues a series of demands to governments and businesses to change. We have those to hand. But a systemic response requires us to look at our role, not just ask others to change. There is no 'them' who will fix this, just 'us' together.

Here we want to state what Oxfam GB plans to do, as we have identified ourselves as being integrated into the system of inequality and poverty too. These plans were originally expressed in Oxfam GB's organisational strategy For a Radically Better World.²⁶

We are working to:



Actively pursue racial justice, decolonization and feminism

In a structurally racist and patriarchal world, Oxfam GB is committed to anti-racism and feminism. This means understanding how racism and patriarchy manifest themselves within our organization and in our interactions with others, making us less safe, as well as challenging the system around us. We are committed to a strategy of safe, feminist and decolonial partnerships, which sees us on a journey to address inequity in our systems and relationships - one in which we are continually learning.



Speak out

We have a duty to call out and challenge the manifestations of the system of poverty that we see today. Oxfam GB will use its position of relative power and public voice to support those who seek change, and to challenge the status quo and the structural injustices that persist. We will work for systemic change using the levers available to us in the UK – including policy but also corporate power, global cultural power and global media reach.



Tackle root causes of crisis and conflict

We understand that fragility and vulnerability are integral parts of the system of poverty today. The lines between development work, climate work, peacebuilding and humanitarian response are blurred and flexible, and so our practice has to change to meet this reality. We will influence the humanitarian, aid and development systems to be shifting power to local organisations and supporting civic space and gender justice in times of crisis.



Change the narratives and stories we tell, to change the harmful systems that they prop up

Shifting mindsets is critical to the systems change we are seeking. We have identified narrative change, and changing what is measured and communicated, as important points of leverage in influencing the system of poverty. A key part of this is to challenge ourselves where our own narratives are still harmful, perpetuating racist ideas of white saviourism and dependency or gender stereotypes.



Respect and invest in the power of people as citizens and the power of movements, grassroots organisations and unions, even in the most vulnerable situations

We must show that we believe in the power of people to effect change together and shape the world around them. This includes women's rights organizations, climate justice movements and activists, and women peacebuilders. This belief must extend to ensuring that they have the funds, the freedom and the protection, if needed, to do so.



Help drive system change to fight inequality

We can't tackle it all in one go, but we can use these approaches above to work with others to experiment, learn and demonstrate alternatives within specific parts of the system of poverty. In our economic justice work we want to support the collective power of workers, particularly paid and unpaid care workers and women workers, to disrupt economies. In our climate justice work, we will focus on channeling funding away from polluters and towards supporting the development of just and transformative climate solutions that are determined by people on the front lines of the climate crisis.

Put together, we hope to help drive economic and climate transformation that is decolonial and feminist – centering care for people and planet.

Ending the lie of development

Poverty remains stubbornly present throughout our world today. Poverty in the lowest-income countries is increasing to higher rates than it was before the pandemic.²⁷⁷ Little progress has been made in reducing hunger on a global scale since 2015 and undernourishment is on the rise.²⁸ Inequality between the Global North and Global South has grown for the first time in 25 years²⁹ and across the world there is a rollback in rights for women and girls.³⁰

Neither are higher income countries immune from persistent poverty and inequality. The Joseph Rowntree Foundation 2024 report on UK poverty found that poverty rates have returned to pre-pandemic levels, with nearly half of those found to be in 'very deep' poverty, with an income far below the standard poverty line.³¹

And our social fabric is under strain as this inequality creates instability. Conflict-affected and fragile contexts are projected to retain the most significant poverty levels in the next decade.³²

Work on poverty relief and development – by communities, governments, charities such as Oxfam and institutions of all kinds – has saved millions of individual lives and addressed symptoms of poverty for millions more: tackling disease, getting girls into school and making positive changes to government policies and the way that companies operate.³³

But we must recognize that progress has been fragile. And when recent crises have hit, we've found out just how precarious that progress has been. The growing weather-related crises associated with climate change, the twin shocks of the COVID-19 pandemic and Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the subsequent food and fuel price crises have laid bare the systemic inequities that persist the world over. Those without power and money have been the hardest hit when shocks have struck and have benefited the least from any recovery, with their voices the least heard.³⁴

We have seen the devastation of life in Gaza. Tens of thousands have been killed, over half the population has been displaced, and many are facing famine. In response, many powerful world leaders failed to quickly call for an immediate ceasefire, failed to ensure adequate humanitarian aid, and continue to arm Israel despite overwhelming evidence of breaches of International Humanitarian Law. The recent escalation, attacks on civilians and hostage taking can never be justified. Yet it is also important to recognise that the international community has failed Palestinians and Israelis alike by failing to address the root causes of the conflict: the long-standing Israeli occupation of Palestinian territory, including the blockade of Gaza. We will not end poverty if we ignore injustice.

'COVID-19 ...is exposing fallacies and falsehoods everywhere:

The lie that free markets can deliver healthcare for all;

The fiction that unpaid care work is not work;

The delusion that we live in a post-racist world;

The myth that we are all in the same boat.

Because while we are all floating on the same sea, it's clear that some are in superyachts while others are clinging to drifting debris.'

UN Secretary-General António Guterres,
Nelson Mandela Lecture, 2020

This report is about what we've got wrong in an approach that has sought to 'manage' poverty rather than do what it takes to end it. It is about realizing that poverty is not just structural - a result of policies and procedures that create it - it is also systemic. Those policies and procedures are fused together by narratives and control of knowledge that reproduce power and privilege and drive people apart - creating a story of 'us' and 'them'. When we believe the lie of scarcity - the story that there is not enough to go around - then we make our relationship to each other one of competition, pitting us against one another rather than being united in common humanity.^{35, 36}

This is about how poverty is very much the same problem as inequality, with extreme want and extreme wealth being two sides of the same coin, and with poverty felt more deeply because of race, class, gender, disability or sexuality. This is because poverty is not an affliction that befalls those who are just unfortunate enough to be poor. It is the result of political and economic systems which create winners and losers and then allow the winners to write the rules.

It is also about how humanitarian crises and conflict are not separate phenomena from systemic poverty and inequality. Very often they are caused and/or exacerbated by them - with the climate crisis as a key factor.

Signs of distress

We have not tackled the systemic roots of poverty, and we have evidence that shows this. This includes:

- The accumulation of extreme wealth. Oxfam has been tracking this trend for a decade. Since 2020, the richest five men in the world have doubled their fortunes. During the same period, almost five billion people globally have become poorer. At current rates, it will take 230 years to end poverty, but we could have our first trillionaire in 10 years.³⁷
- The continued impact of colonialism and its long tail of racism. In the UK today, Black women are almost four times more likely to die in childbirth than white women.³⁸
- The use of gender as a tool to enforce economic disadvantage for women and girls. The proportion of women of working age in the labor market has remained virtually unchanged since 1995.³⁹
- The relationship between climate crisis, fragility and poverty. The amount of money needed to help people affected by extreme weather-related emergencies is eight times larger than it was 20 years ago.⁴⁰

If we have hope of meeting the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), or indeed if we have hope of a future that any of us want on a planet that is capable of sustaining us and future generations, then more of the same poverty management cannot be the answer. Incremental policy changes, projectized development programmes with short term approaches and charitable framings of 'us' leading 'them' to a destination of being 'developed' are all approaches that need to be reassessed. We need to press for systemic change at all levels.

Rejecting more of the same also requires change within institutions such as Oxfam. Oxfam has a proud tradition of campaigning for structural change. In 1983, Oxfam published our first report on the impacts of a changing climate on people.⁴¹ Make Trade Fair⁴² was a seminal economic justice campaign and Oxfam have been a voice concerned with women's rights for decades. Oxfam has been instrumental in reframing the debate on inequality. However, Oxfam has also been guilty of perpetuating harmful narratives and replicating inequities of resources, power, dignity and knowledge that feed systemic poverty.

This report collates much of Oxfam's research and the many influences from which the charity benefits - from partners, allies, movements and thinkers across the world - to sketch out what we mean when we talk about 'a system of poverty'. It lays out the mechanisms by which our global political economy transfers wealth from poorer countries to richer ones, and how that wealth is concentrated at the top within national borders. It illustrates how this extractive system is coming up against the finite limits of planetary boundaries - with dire consequences for poverty, fragility and inequality.

In charting the elements that sustain this system - its interdependencies, its long historical roots and its use of powerful narratives, as well as outright violence - we begin to identify some of the things that must change to reverse the direction of travel and move from extraction to a system that is based on care for people and planet.

Our recommendations here outline how Oxfam GB is seeking to respond to this challenge, unpacking our current strategy, For a Radically Better World.⁴³

Challenging decades of economic and political consensus is not easy, but consider the status quo. It is a vision of extreme wealth, increasing poverty and tolerated inequity, with increasing climate-induced damage. When the status quo is so extreme, radical transformation becomes the common-sense option.

Chapter 2

The system of poverty

This section charts the ways in which global economic and political processes work to reinforce the power and wealth imbalances between rich countries and poorer ones. It then charts how wealth, power and resources within countries are concentrated within national elites, creating both global inequality and national inequality. Finally, it finds that this system is not just inefficient at ending poverty – it is unable to. The fragility, conflict and climate crisis inherent in this system will defeat us.

It is perhaps more comfortable to think of the systems that were set up to tackle poverty: the aid system, the humanitarian system, the Bretton Woods system.⁴⁴

Yet they are just part of a wider political, economic and social system that is much better at extracting and concentrating wealth and power than it is at dispersing and sharing it. This is true within high-income and low-income countries alike, as Oxfam's Commitment to Inequality Index shows.⁴⁵ But the options that lower-income countries have to address poverty and inequality are severely curtailed by the fact that the global system as a whole is very efficient at extracting wealth and power from those poorer countries to the benefit of richer ones.

Today the gap between rich and poor nations is expected to widen for the first time in a generation.⁴⁶ This widening gap and gross inequality is not a natural state. A rainy island in a corner of Europe was not naturally more promising for development than the lush Indus Valley or the silver- and gold-filled Andes. Rather, historians, archaeologists, anthropologists, feminist scholars and economists have confirmed what many from the global majority have always known: that there has been a centuries-old process of accumulation and under-development imposed by the Global North on the Global South.⁴⁷

'Our world stands at a fork in the road; one no less significant than when the United Nations was formed in 1945. But then the majority of countries here did not exist, we exist now. The difference is we want to exist a hundred years from now.'

Mia Amor Mottley, Prime Minister of Barbados

This was the 'guns, germs and steel' of the conquistador era,⁴⁸ and the slavery of the transatlantic trade. It was also colonialism with its brutal suppression of political and economic self-development, commodity dumping and labor and resource extraction.⁴⁹

More recently, structural adjustment programmes, unfair World Trade Organization rules and tied aid have followed this tradition. Such policies could only be justified by the creation and deployment of deeply racist ideas, and it is this racism that continues to infect and corrode policy and practice today.⁵⁰

Focusing in, past the global picture, to look at inequality within countries is even more troubling. Even though we have seen periods where low-income countries have slowly reduced the gap with richer countries, this has not benefited all their citizens equally. The gap between the richest and poorest people within countries has been growing steadily.⁵¹ That system of extraction, therefore, does not stop at national borders but is replicated in national politics, economies and societies. Poverty persists in high-income countries too. It is all of us who, to a greater or lesser extent, are affected.

A global system of extraction

Decades after the formal end of empires, there remain many examples where resources are flowing systematically from the global majority world to the global minority of rich industrialized countries.

At its most basic, this is a picture of the market driving inequality – through unequal terms of trade and global value chains, joined by money flowing to the Global North in the form of debt payments and harmful tax practices. The mechanics that should compensate for this – namely development finance and fair global governance – have proved themselves to be inadequate.

Figure 1 imagines this as reinforcing circular dynamics, centralizing resources and power. We shall come to each of these dynamics in turn.

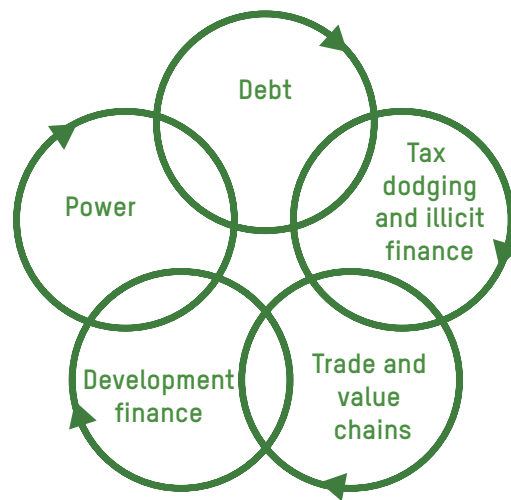


Figure 1: The global system of extraction.

Trade and value chains

Unfair terms of trade, enforced by rich country governments in multilateral trade negotiations, and more recently in bilateral and regional trade deals, have persistently served richer countries well at the expense of poorer ones.

Based on convenient myths of their own development pathways,⁵² these deals have seen rich countries push free trade policies despite clear asymmetries in market power. For much of the last 70 years, the story has been one of the poorest countries being stuck in a position of supplying raw commodities. This has left their economies vulnerable to falls in prices and low in added value, and dependent on imports for manufactured goods or even basics like food. Tragically, the one group of countries that have largely succeeded in this model – the oil-producing countries of the Gulf – are now locked into a fossil fuel global economy that sees them on the front line of the climate crisis.^{53, 54}

It is not just commodities from lower-income countries that industrialized countries have sought to exploit. Such countries have also been valuable sources of cheap workers in global value chains.

Export-led development models linked to global supply chains have brought more people, particularly women, into formal employment. But lack of labor rights and the asymmetries of power that allow global companies to shop around for the cheapest labor mean that too often what flows into low-income countries are poor-quality jobs and low wages.⁵⁵

Oxfam's 2018 Behind the Barcodes report looked at the supply chains of major supermarkets in the USA, the UK and Europe. What it found was a system designed to capture increasing amounts of wealth at the top. During the period studied, between 1995 and 2011, the value of goods sold by supermarkets rose from 27% to over 30% of the total. Meanwhile the share reaching farmers declined from just 16% in 1995 to less than 14% in 2011, with farmers in some countries receiving just 7% on average. Combined with this were human and labor rights abuses.⁵⁶

Debt

National debt can be a useful thing. For many countries, access to global financial markets is vital for investment and liquidity, and debt can be sustainably held and paid. But for countries that are already in a vulnerable position in relation to the global economy, debt can too easily become unsustainable when shocks hit. Collapses in commodity prices such as in the 1970s, the global financial crisis of 2008 to 2009 and the COVID-19 pandemic and climate-related disasters all have consequences in terms of debt crises.

Unsustainable debt has an immediate effect on poverty reduction as servicing that debt competes directly with spending on things that fight poverty in national budgets. Recent research by Debt Relief International shows that spending on core services to reduce poverty (education, health, social protection) is being crowded out by the need to service debt payments.⁵⁷ In fact the authors found that, if all debt service were eliminated, middle- and low-income countries as a group could virtually double their core social spending on policies that would fight poverty.⁵⁸

In the face of the debt crisis, unwillingness to work out a sustainable debt mechanism for all creditors (bilateral, commercial and multilateral, as well as domestic) represents a systemic extraction of resources away from fighting poverty.

Tax dodging and illicit financial flows

This is a murky area, with varying definitions and statistics that inevitably mean we are searching in the dark. It is nevertheless clear that low-income countries are losing a considerable amount of capital and taxable revenue due to the web of global financial secrecy that exists worldwide.

According to one estimate, the equivalent of 10% of global gross domestic product (GDP) is held by individuals in tax havens.⁵⁹ This is overwhelmingly wealth from rich individuals from high-income countries – but not solely. When Oxfam researched this topic in 2016, it found that almost a third (30%) of the wealth of rich Africans is held offshore in tax havens. It is estimated that this costs African countries \$14bn a year in lost tax revenues.⁶⁰

Multinational companies add to the picture with practices that serve to manipulate their accounts across complex company structures and tax havens in order to pay the least tax possible, and profits that could be reinvested in economies are moved out. Poorer countries deliver real value to these companies but in this way lose a considerable amount of capital and tax revenue that could be spent on poverty reduction. A significant study from The United Nations Conference on Trade and Development put the figures at \$100bn a year for lost tax revenues and \$250 to \$300bn a year in total funds lost to development.⁶¹

Finally, asymmetries of market power mean that rich global companies very often don't have to bother to dodge tax at all: instead, they negotiate tax incentives, tax holidays and other forms of subsidy. Between 1980 and 2005, the proportion of sub-Saharan African countries offering tax holidays to companies doubled from 40% to 80%.⁶²

Development finance

Official development assistance (ODA), the officially recognized form of aid, has a lot to commend it. Where it is spent well, with transparency and with strong levels of ownership by recipient governments or communities, it has been instrumental in saving and improving countless lives.

But the fact is, it has not always been paid in full. Rich countries have underpaid lower- and middle-income countries to the tune of \$6.5 trillion since the UN's agreement for countries to spend 0.7% of their Gross National Income on their overseas aid budget was passed in 1970.⁶³ This may not be extraction but it is withholding dues.

To make matters worse, that aid is increasingly being spent within rich countries themselves. Recent OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development) figures show that the 30 donor countries funnelled nearly \$30bn of aid money back into their own pockets by mislabelling what counts as aid.⁶⁴ To take the UK as a striking example, the government's own figures show that it spent nearly twice as much of its aid budget within its own borders in 2022 as it did directly in Africa and Asia combined.⁶⁵

International NGOs such as Oxfam are also part of this picture, having failed to do enough to pass on power and resources to partners and communities and those working on the front line of humanitarian disaster. Figures from 2022 show that direct funding to local organisations has stagnated at 1.2% of overall funding, as UN agencies and INGOs continue to hold onto power in their role as intermediaries despite their commitments to the contrary.⁶⁶ By failing to provide quality funding (multi-year, flexible) and overhead costs to local organisations they are undermining their growth and restricting their role to that of contractual implementer rather than equal partner.

Other forms of development finance have also failed to materialize. In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the IMF (The International Monetary Fund) released a \$650bn issuance of Special Drawing Rights (SDRs), a reserve asset that can supplement countries' reserves and free up money to spend. The majority of this (over 60%) was allocated to high-income countries, which pledged to reallocate the equivalent of \$100bn to poorer nations. However, so far only between \$60bn and \$85bn has been committed, and far less delivered.⁶⁷

'A multilateral sphere that is reconfigured has to be at the heart of our struggle, and the betrayal by the North has to be halted right now. Humanity and life on the planet have been held hostage, but not anymore.'

Emilia Rayes, *Equidad de Género: Ciudadanía, Trabajo y Familia* (Gender Equity: Citizenship, Work and Family)

One of the most reliable sources of finance for poverty reduction, particularly in fragile and conflict-affected states, is remittances, which in many countries outstrip ODA and even foreign direct investment (FDI) in volume.⁶⁸ However, they attract relatively little attention in policy debate and in campaigning and development circles, despite there being a very clear need to make them cheaper for people to send.

Arguably the greatest injustice is in climate finance. Rich and industrialized nations bear responsibility for the climate crisis, which is creating humanitarian, economic and social consequences overwhelmingly for lower- and middle-income countries. This is a question of reparations and justice as those with the least responsibility are those experiencing the worst loss and damage. Yet the \$100bn a year in climate finance that rich countries are required to pay is never delivered, and they use accounting tricks to vastly overestimate the scale of what they do contribute. In 2023 Oxfam calculated that, out of a target of \$100bn, rich countries are supplying only \$21 to 24.5bn.⁶⁹ The jury is out on whether new requirements for loss and damage finance will be met.⁷⁰

The one form of financial flow in Figure 2 that is supposed to be about straightforward poverty reduction is the most scrutinized, withheld, resented and appropriated. This tells us much about the system of poverty.

Power

While many of the examples in this global system have power imbalances implicit within them, it is worth capturing the way that this economic asymmetry is reflected in global governance structures.

The existence of the G7, and even the G20, as vital decision-making forums based on GDP bakes in these inequities. The continued leadership of global financial institutions such as the IMF and the World Bank by nominees from global minority countries is hard to see as anything but a conflict of interest.

Also, reflecting inequities within national societies, some of the most powerful decision-making spaces have barely a woman in sight. At the time of writing there is just one female head of state in the G20.

These imbalances have consequences. For example, it was clearly inappropriate that the OECD, as a club of the richest countries, should decide on how to reform a global tax system that has such a major impact on low-income countries. Unsurprisingly, analysis shows that OECD countries are likely to increase their corporate tax revenues by as much as 19% as a result of the proposed minimum corporate tax rate, while low-income countries will gain only 1%.⁷¹

Charities and INGOs like Oxfam are part of this global power imbalance because resources, decision-making and the production of knowledge are still largely focused in the Global North.⁷² This gives us an outsized influence in civil society in crisis-affected countries at pivotal times of social disruption when individual rights are being rolled back and power entrenched. The lack of investment in local and national civil society organisations means they are not able to influence regional and global decision-making. Instead of facilitating local to global, the power is flowing from the global to local. Many INGOs, including Oxfam, are investing efforts into transforming, but much more needs to be done.

The scale of global extraction

The mechanisms explored above are not an exhaustive list, but illustrate the processes and impacts on poverty inherent in the global economic and political system. Attempts have been made, however, to quantify the whole picture. In his book *The Great Divide*, Jason Hickel highlights work from the think tank Global Financial Integrity and the Centre of Applied Research at the Norwegian School of Economics which found that in 2012 (the last year they compared this data) low-income countries received just over \$2 trillion in aid, investment and income. But in return, in the same year \$5 trillion flowed out – a difference of \$3 trillion.⁷³

Oxfam calculates that at least an additional \$27.4 trillion is needed between now and 2030 to fill financing gaps in health, education and social protection and to tackle the climate crisis in low- and middle-income countries. That equates to an annual financing gap of \$3.9 trillion.⁷⁴

Capturing national wealth

This macro picture is only the first layer of the system of poverty, one that explains inequality between countries. But to understand the widening gap between some of the very richest people in the world and the people with the least, we have to look at a vital set of mechanisms at national level.

This is a heterogeneous picture: levels of wealth capture, inequality, poverty and discrimination vary considerably from place to place. But the overall trends show that, since 1980, inequality within countries has doubled.⁷⁵

This means that inequality is preventing any overall national growth in lower-income countries from leading to poverty reduction. It also means that poverty exists in high- and low-income countries alike.

Figure 2 zooms in to our emerging system of poverty to identify some of the most important mechanisms at country level.

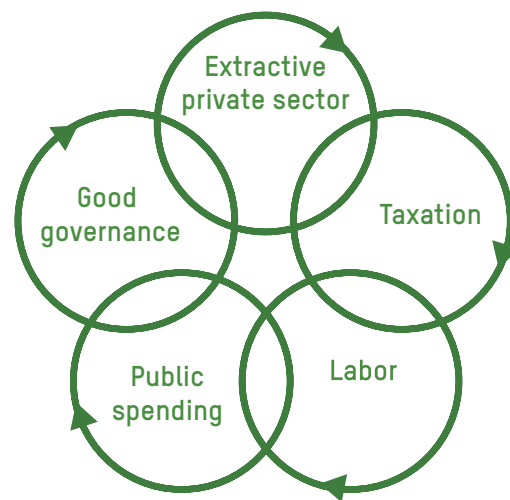


Figure 2: The emerging system of poverty.

Taxation

Taxation is a powerful tool to directly reduce inequality, taking the most from those who can afford it to spend on the wider good. But it depends how the tax system is designed. To reduce inequality, a country would have to have progressive designs for income tax and corporate taxation, avoid the overuse of consumption taxes such as value added tax (VAT) and directly tax wealth and land.

Oxfam's most recent Commitment to Reducing Inequality Index found that only 63 of the 161 countries surveyed had tax systems that are reducing inequality, while 97 are increasing it. This reflects the continuing dependence of many countries on VAT revenues and their very low collection of progressive income taxes.⁷⁶ This not only has impacts on income and wealth inequality but tends to penalize women and racialized groups, who are likely to have less income from work and to be hit hardest by consumption taxes.⁷⁷

Top rates of tax on income have become lower and less progressive, with the average tax rate on the richest falling from 58% in 1980 to 42% more recently in OECD countries.⁷⁸ Corporation tax fell by half from a global average of 49% in 1985 to around 24% in 2018.⁷⁹

Finally, very few governments are responding to the rise in wealth inequality. Only 4 cents in every dollar of tax revenue come from wealth taxes, and half the world's billionaires live in countries with no inheritance tax on the money that they give to their children.⁸⁰

Labor

For individuals, a decent job with a fair wage and legal protections is a powerful route out of poverty. For a country, a powerful way to reduce inequality and poverty is to see that the proportion of national income that goes to labor is greater than the returns to capital. Unfortunately, things seem to be going the other way. The USA and Europe have been leading this trend, but the International Labour Organization (ILO) calculates that about half of all countries have seen a decline in the share of income going to workers in the past few years.⁸¹ Prices are outpacing pay the world over.⁸²

Governments can, and should, have a role in correcting this through policies such as minimum wages and the protection of labor rights. But between 2019 and 2022, the average minimum wage across the globe fell from 51% to 47% of per capita GDP.⁸³

Furthermore, the International Trade Union Conference (ITUC) has noted an increase in the suppression of workers' rights in the past few years, with 9 out of 10 of countries violating the right to strike, and 77% the right to establish or join a union.⁸⁴

The system of work today structurally disadvantages women, who are concentrated in the most undervalued and under-rewarded sectors of the economy, including:

- Unpaid care and domestic work: in no country on earth do men do the same amount of care work as women.⁸⁵
- The informal economy, where we find some of the most vulnerable workers with few rights and protections, meaning low pay and poor conditions. In most countries, a greater percentage of women are informally employed, a trend that is more pronounced in poorer countries.⁸⁶ In addition, this is often a sector with high proportions of migrant and racialized workers.

- ‘Feminized’ sectors of the economy, such as the garment trade, which take advantage of women’s perceived natural abilities (skill at domestic tasks, docile nature, even ‘smaller nimble fingers’⁸⁷) to excuse differentials in pay.
- Finally, where women are in formal and professional roles on a par with men, gender pay gaps persist,⁸⁸ as well as wider inequities over a lifetime such as less access to pensions.

Of course, there is one group that is consistently winning in this picture. The UK’s 100 top-earning CEOs were each paid £3.4m on average in 2022, saw their pay rise in real terms and earned 140 times more than the average worker in the UK.⁸⁹

Public spending

Spending on the provision of free healthcare and education and on social protection is a powerful tool against poverty and inequality. It is particularly valuable for women and girls and racialized groups – not just because they are more likely to need these services, but because in their absence they are often expected to fill in the gaps with unpaid care and domestic work.⁹⁰

No country has made significant progress against poverty without significant investments in public services. And yet the fiscal space to deliver the services is constantly challenged. Oxfam calculates that, in 2023, 85% of the world’s population will be living in the grip of austerity measures.⁹¹

Cuts can often come when investment is needed the most. In the 2022 Commitment to Reducing Inequality Index, Oxfam found that during the COVID-19 health emergency, almost half (49%) of low- and lower-middle-income countries cut their budgets allocated to health. Furthermore, more than two-thirds of countries cut the budget share of education and social protection.⁹²

There are big differences to be seen between the responses of rich and poor countries. These are partly explained by rich countries having central banks to print money and access to international financial markets, and not having an existing debt burden to service.

But global institutions have a role to play too. Oxfam has found that for every \$1 the IMF encouraged a set of poor countries to spend on public goods, it told them to cut four times more through austerity measures.⁹³

Extractive private sector

This is a rather catch-all term for a set of trends and behaviours that characterize our economies. While some are illegal such as corruption, while some are seen as desirable such as privatization. What they all have in common is a shifting of resources from public use to private hands and shifting it up towards the best-off. To give the briefest of overviews, we are talking about the following.

Term	Definition
Corporate welfare	The tax breaks, subsidies, cheap land and more that governments offer as incentives to private businesses supposedly as way to de-risk needed investment. ODA is also used in this way through what is called 'blended finance'.
Privatization, outsourcing, public-private partnerships (PPPs) and more	The transfer of key industries to the private sector, as well as the use of the private sector to run public services. ⁹⁴
Financialization	The increasing size and importance of the finance sector in an economy. This is associated with: financial instability and crises <ul style="list-style-type: none">• undue political influence• excessive pay and rewards• effects in the wider economy, where vital goods and• services (houses, food, even care homes) are treated as financial assets.
Shareholder primacy	Since the 1970s, businesses in the rich world have been increasingly structured and incentivized to serve the interests of wealthy shareholders above all other groups. In the 1970s, for example, UK companies paid about 10% of their profits in dividends. That has increased to about 70% in recent years – at the expense of workers, suppliers and other stakeholders. ⁹⁵
Quantitative easing	The injection of money into the economy to stimulate (it is hoped) spending and economic growth. However, it works by increasing asset prices, which benefits those who are already wealthy.
Corruption	Corruption is undoubtedly a crime against people affected the most by poverty. However, this is a universal problem. In the UK, Transparency International found that the way the government handled bids for the supply of personal protective equipment (PPE) during the COVID-19 pandemic was 'systemically biased in favour of those with political access'. ⁹⁶

An important reflection is that a private sector is absolutely vital to poverty reduction. But the nature of that private sector – its drivers and incentives, its regulations, its size and its relative power – all matter enormously in whether it is effective or not.

Open societies and good governance

Levying progressive taxes, funding quality public services, regulating companies and ensuring that workers are protected: democratic governance is a key tool we have available to ensure the redistribution of wealth and the delivery of essential services for the benefit of the whole population.

But policymaking does not happen in a vacuum, and is subject to the influences of histories, prejudices and narratives that benefit elites. Many states – often democracies – still enshrine discrimination in law. According to data from UN Women, in 2018 there were still 39 states where women faced laws discriminating against their economic equality, such as not being able to inherit in the same way as their male siblings or spouses.⁹⁷ Sixty-four countries still have laws criminalizing ‘homosexual activity’,⁹⁸ often as a legacy of colonialism.⁹⁹

Such laws often persist because governments are not representative of the people they represent. Only six countries in the world have parliaments that are made up of as many women as men.¹⁰⁰

Furthermore, the ‘political capture’¹⁰¹ of the democratic process by the wealthy distorts who government works for. The scale of money involved in campaign contributions, the money spent on lobbying and increasingly the ability to fund disinformation¹⁰² throw doubt on the health of democracy as we know it.

When good governance fails, inequalities often lie at the heart of grievances expressed by citizens when claiming their rights. From Chile to Lebanon, citizens have been expressing their grievances at the injustice of inequalities.^{103, 104} Too often, however, the response comes in the form of increased crackdowns on the rights to assembly, association and expression. CIVICUS’s annual monitor shows that civic freedoms are being curtailed in a growing number of countries. Only 3.2% of the world’s population live in countries that CIVICUS classes as having open civic space.¹⁰⁵

Capital on the move, people constrained

Putting together these global and national pictures, we get a picture of unequal global trade, global value chains and multinational companies, and webs of financial secrecy, as well as national politics that are unwilling or unable to tackle inequality and look after those people left behind.

One of the most striking features of our global economy is how unregulated it is. Capital can move freely, both legitimately and illegitimately, flowing directly from the lowest income parts of the world to the richest people in the richest countries. Contrast this with the ever increasing billions spent on security, defense and border control to prevent people doing the same.¹⁰⁶ Capital seeks return and is celebrated as foreign direct investment. People seek a future and are called illegal immigrants.



Julia, 44, and her family from Kharkiv, Ukraine at the Hallo Kijowska reception centre for refugees in Korczowa, Poland.

Credit: JB Russell / Panos / Oxfam

A system that cannot end poverty

Proponents of the status quo and the current system tend to point to it as being the only viable option. The argument is that incremental improvements – through growth that is eventually shared – get results while avoiding threats to individual freedom posed by more interventionist approaches. This has informed most economic thinking for the past 50 years.

There are several significant problems with this view. The first, as has just been explored, is that our economies are not structurally suited to sharing growth but rather to concentrating wealth and creating inequality. It is very possible to have rising GDP as well as rising poverty.¹⁰⁷

The second is that growth itself is not a given. Slow growth had been considered a problem mostly for rich industrialized countries, but now the World Bank is predicting a 'decade of lost growth' globally, affecting emerging economies also.¹⁰⁸

But even if we could have the broad-based inclusive growth that many governments dream of, we come up against the very finite limits of our planet.

Jason Hickel presents compelling data on this, finding that if we were to rely on GDP growth as the main engine of development, it would take 207 years to get everyone in the world to a reasonable level of living on \$5 a day. Furthermore, this would require global GDP to increase to 175 times its present size.¹⁰⁹ Even assuming that significant strides can be made in clean energy, this astronomical growth is not feasible without irreparable damage to water levels, forests and soils, as well as the climate.¹¹⁰

The importance of climate justice

It is essential to understand just how deeply the climate crisis is a question of justice. The climate crisis is driven by consumption by the rich. Since the 1990s, the super-rich 1% have burned through twice as much of the carbon budget as the poorest half of humanity combined.¹¹¹ The rich consume more, but also make money from climate damage. Through investments, billionaires emit a million times as much as someone in the bottom 90% of humanity.¹¹² The consequences, including typhoons, heatwaves and droughts, disproportionately affect poorer countries and marginalized groups.¹¹³

The climate crisis is reinforcing existing economic and political imbalances and is amplifying the fault lines of a global economy based on racist colonial practices. And within countries, wealth and income inequality intersect with race, gender, ethnicity, age and disability to create even greater vulnerability to climate impacts. A study across 573 major flood disasters in 67 middle- and high-income countries found that the death toll from floods is seven times higher in the most unequal countries compared to the more equal ones.¹¹⁴

This double injustice, that those who contributed least to the climate crisis are experiencing the worst impacts, is joined by a third injustice. There is every risk that the transition to meet the challenges of climate change will benefit the wealthy too, and further marginalize others.

An estimated 733 million people remain without access to electricity. Women bear the brunt of this, collecting fuel and cooking in unhealthy fumes.

However, of the \$2.8 trillion invested in renewables globally between 2000 and 2020, only 2% went to Africa. In addition, men are overwhelmingly gaining from any jobs associated with clean energy.¹¹⁵

Furthermore the rush for raw materials to shape new tech solutions for a 'green transition' are adding to pollution, land grabs, and displacement for many.¹¹⁶

Limits on resource use, energy use and emissions are vital. But unless those limits are shouldered by the wealthy, and unless a transition economy can offer real promise to the most left behind, the system of poverty will only be strengthened. An important start would be the 'polluter pays' principle of greater taxation of wealth and polluting industries and activities.

The creation of fragility

There is a further reason why the current system simply cannot work to end poverty. The extreme inequality and precarity it creates are reducing the capacities of communities and governments at all levels to cope with the damage, and are contributing to conflicts that will ensure that poverty persists. This is what we mean by the creation of fragility.

Too often in discussions about poverty we treat fragile and conflict-affected contexts and humanitarian disasters as separate phenomena. But the inequality at the heart of the system of poverty both creates and exacerbates disasters and conflicts, and erodes the ability to respond to them.

Inequality creates violence and damages social cohesion and trust within communities. According to Richard Wilkinson, one of the authors of *The Spirit Level*, 'the most well-established environmental determinant of levels of violence is the scale of income differences between rich and poor'.¹¹⁷

A note: this is not the same as saying that poverty creates violence. It is inequality that does this and violence is a response to precarity at all levels: from those in poverty who feel injustice, but also those with wealth who want to sustain their position at all costs. Indeed, it is argued that 'organized violence is one of the most strategic, efficient and logical ways for political and criminal elites to sustain their power'.¹¹⁸

As this report is written, the intense bombardment of Gaza continues and the humanitarian situation is like nothing agencies such as Oxfam have seen before. This most recent escalation was triggered by violent attacks by Hamas and other Palestinian armed groups on Israel on 7 October, and what followed with Israel's indiscriminate and disproportionate response. But its roots are in decades of injustice and systemic disempowerment and dispossession of Palestinian people and land. The 17 year blockade of Gaza strangled its economic and social and political development and meant that even before the total siege, more than 45% of people in Gaza – and nearly 70% of youth - were unemployed and 80% were dependent on some form of international aid.¹¹⁹

At a global level, the OECD currently characterizes 60 contexts as being fragile.¹²⁰ Furthermore, it predicts that, by 2030, 86% of those living in extreme poverty will be in fragile contexts. Today 103 million people are estimated to be forcibly displaced worldwide, becoming increasingly vulnerable to poverty and human rights abuses.¹²¹

A doomed system

Our economies are not just creating inequality and perpetuating poverty. They are creating the climate crisis and environmental damage that make it impossible, if we remain on the current path, to end poverty for all on a planet that can sustain us. And they are contributing to the precarity and fragility that erode the capacities and governance that we need to end poverty.

Figure 3 completes the image of the system of poverty, showing how it is constrained by the climate crisis and fragility around the system of wealth concentration.

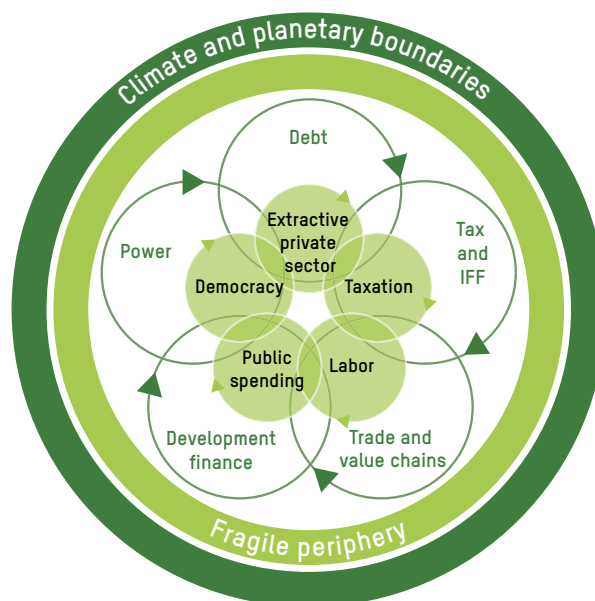


Figure 3: The system of poverty, showing how it is constrained by the climate crisis and fragility around the system of wealth concentration.

Chapter 3

How does the system persist?

This section goes beyond the structural analysis of poverty and inequality to look at what makes it systemic in nature. It shows how it is not a neutral system but one that responds to the power dynamics set by the winners, and is reinforced through the promotion of beliefs and narratives about race, gender, class and meritocracy that seek to excuse gross inequality. Ultimately it is enforced by recourse to violence at all levels.

Why do we accept this system? This is the \$3.9 trillion dollar question. After all, as we have seen, this is not a system that serves any of us well and looks like one that few would choose.

It is also a useful question since understanding what sustains this system must be the first step towards dismantling it.

System dynamics

The first answer might be that this is a system, not a bureaucracy or even a government. It has no grand designer we can hold to account, no governance and no organigram to show how it works. It is hard to identify at all. But it is working to reinforce itself in complex ways.

To say that there is no grand designer does not mean there are no winners, or that those winners are not acting out of self-interest to preserve their relative positions. Millions of individual decisions are made each day by people reinforcing the system, and the actions of some matter more than others. When we talk about the injustice of inequality it is not just that there are obscenities of wealth alongside tragedies of poverty. Extreme wealth creates and reinforces poverty.

'Any real change implies the breakup of the world as one has always known it, the loss of all that gave one an identity, the end of safety. And at such a moment, unable to see and not daring to imagine what the future will now bring forth, one clings to what one knew, or dreamed that one possessed. Yet, it is only when a man is able, without bitterness or self-pity, to surrender a dream he has long possessed that he is set free – he has set himself free – for higher dreams, for greater privileges.'

James Baldwin, *Nobody Knows My Name*

The ways in which it does this are multiple: excess wealth in search of returns plays a large part in driving debt,¹²² and also in the instability of financial crises¹²³ and misery for millions, while investments in fossil fuels are exacerbating the climate crisis. Capital flight and tax avoidance by rich multinational companies leave low-income countries dependent on aid or debt. Unsustainable debt leads to austerity measures and cuts in vital public services. Informal, insecure work reduces the tax base to invest in the health and education that would produce a more highly skilled workforce.

The connections go on. And the most crucial interplay is that of political capture, which ensures that democratic governance and citizen participation – the most powerful tool we have to reverse the direction of travel in this system – are too often blunted by the power of today's economic winners.

Strong roots

This system did not emerge out of nowhere. It has very strong roots that go deep into our cultural memory. Certainly those roots go back to colonization, to the slave trade and to empire. The current fault lines of political geography were set in those times and continue to determine global power imbalances, as well as – through the racism they nurtured – the structure of our societies.

But the roots go deeper than this. A phenomenon characteristic of this system, and one that we see time and time again, is the preference to privatize gains and socialize losses. We see it today when banks get bailed out and public tax systems pick up the bill, and when public-private partnerships get out of hand and governments in low-income countries are left paying extraordinary amounts.¹²⁴ Most incredibly, we saw it historically in the British government's decision to compensate slave owners, and not the enslaved people, after the abolition of slavery.

As David Graeber and David Wengrow show in their book *The Dawn of Everything*, this has very clear roots in the conception of private property in the Roman legal system. This is the basis of most Western legal systems today. This is not to say that other peoples at that time did not recognize ownership and property – naturally they did – but that usually came with an explicit expectation to care for this asset. In Roman law, to own something was simply to possess the right to use it (*usus*), to enjoy the products of it (*fructus*) and to damage or destroy it (*abusus*). Naturally this right was only available to men, who were considered to 'own' the slaves and women and children of a household too.¹²⁵

To unpick this system of poverty, then, we have to ask some serious questions about some of our fundamental ideas and assumptions. This is not a process of 'development' designed for a binary understanding of the developed and developing world.

The hegemony of knowledge

That is a difficult thing to do, because of the overwhelming status of male Western thought and knowledge in our global system today.

This is not to make an anti-intellectual or 'down with experts' point. But everything we know about history and our societies today tells us that the knowledge we value – that in written form, from high-status institutions and people – is likely to favour the ideas of those with access to the tools and institutions to produce and distribute thought (or indeed to appropriate it, as much knowledge from science and maths or medicine did not originate in the West). The very nature of this report, from an institution like Oxfam, is reflective of this process.¹²⁶ Oral traditions, the indigenous knowledge of colonized nations or the traditional knowledge of women have been largely sidelined. The violence of the witch-hunts across Europe and the Americas is suggested as one vivid example of the systemic suppression of women's traditional knowledge and power.¹²⁷

Today, knowledge of economics has an unrivalled position in policy-making. But as economist Jayati Ghosh points out, economics maintains this pre-eminent position largely by being in the service of power, sidelining exploration and knowledge that would challenge current powerholders.¹²⁸

We have much to gain from embracing different systems of thought or knowledge. We have to accept that this approach will inevitably challenge our own Western norms and assumptions, which have been able to dominate without challenge for generations. Equitable knowledge sharing is radical and may not allow for complete alignment across worldviews in neatly packaged and published formats, but rather calls for iterative rather than definitive knowledge generation using a range of oral, written, visual and physical mediums.

The power of narratives

Narratives and stories are extremely powerful tools in directing behaviour. They shape our whole world view, are easily internalized and then become self-policing.¹²⁹ In a story often quoted from his autobiography, we hear that Nelson Mandela – one of the world’s greatest leaders and a lifelong fighter for racial justice – was momentarily terrified to find himself a passenger on a plane with a Black pilot.¹³⁰

Some narratives are inherently harmful – racism, patriarchy, xenophobia, queerphobia – and are used to justify discrimination and violence.

Others seem more benign but are weaponized in the system of poverty to lead to disadvantage. The idea of women as ‘naturally caring’, for example, is used to excuse the concentration of women in unpaid, low-paid and feminized sectors of the economy. (The answer to this is not a narrative where women are not seen as caring – we want everyone to be caring – but where being caring doesn’t imply a position of less economic value.)

One of the most powerful narratives that explains a system of such inequity is that of meritocracy. Despite much evidence to the contrary,¹³¹ there is still a widespread belief that reward is in proportion to hard work and ability. One study suggested a theory of ‘system justification’ for this: a need to believe that the current system is just in order to explain one’s lot in life.¹³²

These narratives receive important stamps of approval in what we measure. GDP remains the primary measure of economic progress. It dictates national policy decisions as well as prestige and power on the world stage. This is despite the wealth of literature pointing out that GDP does a poor job of describing the economy as it really is: leaving out any understanding of distribution, not counting impacts on the environment and ascribing no value to labor that isn’t paid (particularly women’s unpaid care work and the toil of many in the informal economy).¹³³ It therefore measures, celebrates and protects the extractive, unequal and sexist economy that we currently have.

The 'us' and 'them' framing of helplessness and dependency has not served anyone well but has been toxic to those whom it has denied leadership and agency, and to those whose creativity and expertise is devalued.

A final reflection on narratives must take aim, too, at the narratives of the aid industry. The 'us' and 'them' framing of helplessness and dependency has not served anyone well but has been toxic to those whom it has denied leadership and agency, and to those whose creativity and expertise is devalued. This has absolutely been part of the system of poverty that seeks to protect the 'white saviour' from accountability and has at times been little more than the fig-leaf for structural injustice.

The role of violence

Reinforcing dynamics, political capture, insidious narratives; all these are powerful dynamics that knit together the system of poverty. But we mustn't forget that much of this system is ultimately enforced through recourse to threat and violence.

On the world stage, violence is used to enforce control and the ability to extract resources. Beyond this, Professor of Peace Studies Paul Rogers identifies the primary security strategy of Western powers in the early 21st century as being 'liddism'. That is, keeping a lid on the instability created by global inequity and environmental stress through public order control and military force where necessary.¹³⁴ World military spending had, by April 2023, reached an all-time high of \$2.24 trillion a year.¹³⁵

In section 2.3, we explored how inequality fractures societies and leads to violence and fragility. But it is also important to note the role of violence as a rational tool employed by political and economic elites to sustain their power within a country.¹³⁶

Nor is this a practice confined to lower-income counties (or states deemed too 'weak' to control it). Fatal violence by police in the USA overwhelmingly affects Black people, followed by Hispanic people and other races.¹³⁷ This is the use of force by the state, feeding off racist narratives and systematically targeting people of colour to reduce their collective power.

Within the home, violence against women, girls and non-binary people serves to reinforce power relations, as well as controlling women's access to public space and life. It is still the case that one in three women will experience domestic or sexual violence in her lifetime.¹³⁸

And in a world made precarious by inequality, companies and wealthy individuals increasingly employ personal recourse to violence. The private security services market is due to grow by \$56.33bn between 2021 and 2026.¹³⁹

Inadequate political response

Of course, there are many who have long fought the system of poverty, often at great cost. In recent decades Occupy, the Fight Inequality Alliance, Black Lives Matter, #MeToo and Extinction Rebellion are just some of the popular movements that have exposed aspects of the inequalities that blight our world. For a decade, world leaders have voiced concerns about inequality. The IMF and the World Bank now talk about the need to reduce gaps in income and to address gender inequality. Leading economists, and even the wealthiest themselves, have spoken out.¹⁴⁰

The political response is mixed, and interesting. Some countries are forging ahead with new policy directions. Argentina levied a one-off wealth tax to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic, successfully raising \$2.4bn.¹⁴¹ In the USA, President Biden is proposing a 'billionaire minimum tax rate'¹⁴² something that has now been put on the G20 agenda for global discussion by President Lula of Brazil.¹⁴³

But there are also signs of things going in the wrong direction. Rising authoritarianism and narrowing civic space, the closing of borders and the use of culture wars to further divide 'them' and 'us' all threaten to reinforce the power of the system's existing winners.



A group of protesters demonstrating against racism in Barcelona on 8 December 2020 following the death of George Floyd in the USA.

Credit: Pablo Tosco / Oxfam Intermón

Chapter 4

The system we want: how to build lasting change and be true collaborators

This section explores a direction of travel for an altered global system, challenging the current model of 'charity' to move to a system that is just, reparative and regenerative for all. It calls on individuals, communities, businesses and governments to reimagine their role in this system. It also outlines what Oxfam GB seeks to do to create systemic change.

Turning this system around will be the task of a generation. It is place-making on a global scale, requiring us to imagine together, tell stories together, measure and value different things and organize ourselves differently.

New truths, not new targets

What sort of precedents are there for this? Efforts such as the Millennium Development Goals, or the SDGs, communicated a valuable message about the outcomes we wanted, and in the case of the SDGs were fully negotiated across nations. But when it came to how to achieve them, there was no pathway other than self-disclosed measurement, and no consideration of the politics, beliefs, deep narratives or communities of interest that it would take to get there. The hope seems to have been that the same system would somehow deliver very different outcomes.

'If something did go terribly wrong in human history – and given the current state of the world, it's hard to deny something did – then perhaps it began to go wrong precisely when people started losing that freedom to imagine and enact other forms of social existence.'

David Graeber and David Wengrow,
The Dawn of Everything, 2021

An alternative example to consider as a precedent is the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR). While no one could claim that human rights have been universally respected since the adoption of the UDHR in 1948, it has offered both protection and the basis of justice to many. It has been the foundation of numerous binding international laws and conventions which provide both protection and redress. In addition, it acts as a powerful positive story of what we should rightly expect from life, and so is used to spur demands for social justice.¹⁴⁴

What makes the UDHR powerful is that it brought into being a new human truth – the existence of inalienable rights – through the power of imagination. We have to remember that every part of the system of poverty we have today is a social creation. It too was imagined; it contains no laws of nature and we have the ability to imagine something else. Not just different outcomes, but a different system. New truths, not new targets.

But of course the UDHR was only one part of the truth. As many scholars and activists have maintained, it was a largely Western concept of individual rights.¹⁴⁵ The truth we need to find is one that awakens not just a sense of our rights, but our collective capabilities and the valuable contribution we can make to the world around us.

We don't have to design this system perfectly from the start. It's not a 10-point-plan or even a 'mission'. And we almost certainly shouldn't design it at some big summit or global moment. The how is as important as the what, as the how is the practice of communally imagining, experimenting, sharing and knitting together a new system.

Building lasting systemic change

However, we can begin to sketch out the direction we want to go in as a source of inspiration. Based on what's not working today, it might look something like Figure 4. While we start with the merely 'charitable', we move away from that to a place that is regenerative and caring for all – including our planet.



Figure 4:
Building lasting systemic change

Regenerative for all: A system based on values of mutual care and freedom, rather than ownership.

Reparative: Just, based on compensation, apology and dignity.

Diverse: Not just respecting identities, but mutual support to flourish.

Imaginative: Experimenting with solutions at all levels of society.

Participatory: Drawing on all human talent and knowledge.

Truthful: With self-awareness, empathy and solidarity.

Charitable: Taking action to sympathise and support.

Inspiration for this illustration is taken from the Ladder of Racial Justice by Tema Okun, <https://www.fammed.wisc.edu/files/webfm-uploads/documents/diversity/LifeLongJourney.pdf>

'To build community requires vigilant awareness of the work we must continually do to undermine all the socialization that leads us to behave in ways that perpetuate domination.'

bell hooks, *Teaching Community: A Pedagogy of Hope*, 2003

These attributes have always been part of our human experience, but they are not the values that have been encouraged in our current system of poverty.

As for the practicalities of how, there are many good thoughts already circulating and much going on in communities around the world that we can draw on to propose a very broad theory of change.

1 Start with the individual – be true collaborators

Practitioners and scholars of racial justice and feminism promote journeys of self-learning to help individuals understand how they fit into and behave within systems of structural inequality. Just as we are all called upon in that framework to be actively anti-racist, so there are calls for us to be 'poverty abolitionists' in a system of poverty, using our role as consumers and citizens to make active choices against poverty.¹⁴⁶ The organization Larger Us invites campaigners to start with understanding psychologies before anything else, and Oxfam has long used the idea of the 'power within' as a vital first awakening of capacity to enact change.^{147, 148}

What is vital is that this is not a process to increase individualism, but an individual journey into the communal and relational; from 'I think therefore I am' to the African Ubuntu philosophy of 'I am because we are'.

2 Invest in the architecture of change

Institutions of all kinds have been called into question in recent years, from churches to charities to media organizations, and movement-building is seen as a safer and more efficient investment in change. Healthy critique of institutions is vital, and movements inject new energy and new ideas. But change is a long-term business and those ideas and energy need a home to sustain them.

Immy Kaur of CIVIC SQUARE in Birmingham makes the case that the ideas of universal health for all embedded in the UK's National Health Service were not realized through ideas alone but were made manifest in physical doctors' surgeries in every community in the country.¹⁴⁹ This kind of architecture – dispersed and connected, not centralized – is vital for embodying change and should be the inspiration in humanitarian and aid systems too.

3 Experiment with alternatives

At whatever scale, the world needs good examples of radically reimagined economic and social life: whether in the family¹⁵⁰ or in local community schemes,¹⁵¹ whether bold ideas at local government level or alternative business structures.¹⁵² We need alternative ways of thinking about the economy other than GDP.¹⁵³

We also need to see these alternatives within the development and charity sector, responding to the leadership of grassroots movements and communities, and creating systems that enable that leadership by ceding power and resources to others. The idea is expressly not to develop some alternative hegemonic system. It is to practise using our muscles of being citizens rather than consumers. Radical imagination is a skill we need to invest in.

4 Greater national equality through greater democracy

Some of our best inventions against inequality are already here – free quality public services, progressive taxation and labor rights to ensure decent, well-paid jobs. The inadequacy or restriction of these things in too many places is a political choice, one that we must consistently call out. It can be tempting to point to the failure of democracy to deliver the long-term thinking and consistent drive needed. But the answer to this is not less democracy, but more. Not just ‘kick them out’ at the ballot box, but participatory methods such as citizens’ assemblies and more power and resources devolved to local levels. And we need better representation of women, women of colour and LGBTQIA+ – not just aiming for different faces to represent existing dominant interest groups but having different interest groups represented.

5 New global conversations

At the global level, we need institutions that are capable of encouraging new conversations: about reparative justice and global reparations, for instance (the design of the new Loss and Damage Fund is a good place to start) or a concerted effort to meet the challenge of multinational companies dodging tax, such as a world tax body. The opportunity to discuss coordinated taxation of billionaires at the G20 summits should be grabbed with both hands. We need reform and radical reimagining of the global financial architecture so that it explicitly aims to end extreme inequality. Where multilateralism is not achieving consensus, new progressive alliances of states, based on values and not geopolitical interests, can drive forward ideas.

‘Reimagining social contracts is about solutions, alternatives, the rediscovery of old ways, and the creativity of new ways.’

Esther Mwaure-Muiru, International Land Coalition

The most important thing is to avoid ‘all or nothing’ thinking. Even with something as existential as the climate crisis, it is not a case of winning or losing. Every degree of warming matters and every degree is worth fighting for. Similarly, in changing the system of poverty, every change that we can make in our neighbourhoods or cities, businesses or workplaces is a step in the right direction, and could send ripples across the system further than we can imagine.

Experimenting with alternatives

Alternatives to understanding progress

In New Zealand (or *Aotearoa* in Māori language) policymaking is based on a wellbeing framework, accompanied by the He Ara Waiora, a framework that helps the Treasury to understand waiora, often translated as a Māori perspective on wellbeing.¹⁵⁴

Alternative development pathways

The Buenos Aires Commitment from members of the Economic Commission of Latin America and Caribbean states (ECLAC) 'places care at the center of a new development pattern that prioritizes the sustainability of life and the planet as the path to a transformative recovery with gender equality... it recognizes the right of people to care for others, to be cared for and to exercise self-care.'¹⁵⁵

Alternative politics

In 2021 the island of Jersey initiated a 'climate conversation' on how to meet its ambition to become carbon neutral. This was designed to be mass participatory across the Island, but also to involve citizens in the design and decision making through a citizen's assembly, and then importantly in the consent and participation for delivery.¹⁵⁶

Alternative business

There are many examples of injecting democratic ownership and governance into business. Ten percent of the world now works for a cooperative and this share is growing. These include rural social enterprises that are delivering decent work for women and marginalized groups and huge multinational cooperatives that are lifting entire regions out of poverty.¹⁵⁷

Alternative crisis response

In Ukraine, which has almost 7 million internally displaced people (IDPs) due to the the Russian invasion, a model of IDP councils is being developed to lead decision-making at local and regional level through models of solidarity.¹⁵⁸

Oxfam GB's priority responses

Usually in this part of a report, Oxfam issues a series of demands to government and businesses to change. We have those prepared elsewhere. But here we want to state what Oxfam GB is doing, as we have identified ourselves as being integrated into the system of poverty.

In response we are working to:

Actively pursue racial justice, decolonization and feminism

In a structurally racist and patriarchal world, Oxfam GB is committed to anti-racism and intersectional feminism. This means understanding how racism and patriarchy manifest within Oxfam GB and in our interactions with others, making us less safe, as well as challenging the systems around us. We operate in a global network of Oxfam country teams, national partners and communities, where we have a position of power based on our history, global position, resources and accustomed practices and behaviours. We have made steps towards these aims, but we have much more still to learn and do as we progress.

We are committed to a strategy of safe, feminist and decolonial partnerships within this, which sees us on a journey to address inequity in our systems and relationships, including the production of knowledge. We aim to be a partner of choice, engaging in equal partnerships – with Oxfam country offices, Southern Oxfam affiliates and national, local and global civil society and other partners – built on trust, mutual accountability and solidarity.

Speak out and raise the voices of activists in the UK

We have a duty to call out and challenge the manifestations of the system of poverty we see today. Oxfam GB will continue to use its position of relative power and its public voice to challenge the status quo and the structural injustices that persist.

We will work to achieve policy change with UK powerholders and within a global system. We will promote international solidarity between people and invite people in the UK to raise their voice and work with us to tackle the system of poverty – for us all.

Tackle root causes of crisis and conflict

We understand that fragility and vulnerability are integral parts of the system of poverty today. They are not random events that require one-off humanitarian assistance, but are structurally linked to the climate crisis, inequality and power imbalances. The lines between development work, climate work, peacebuilding and humanitarian response are blurred and flexible, and so our practice has to change to meet this reality. We are building understanding of the nature of fragility and conflict into our wider work, and building an understanding of inequality into our responses in fragile and conflict-affected settings.

Furthermore, we will influence the wider humanitarian and aid and development system to be shifting power to local organisations and supporting civic space and gender justice in times of crisis.

Change the narratives and stories we tell, to change the harmful systems they prop up

We have identified narrative change, and changing what is measured and communicated, as important points of leverage in influencing the system of poverty, and where we can show thought leadership. We will continue to call out extreme wealth to tackle the myths and to highlight its role in sustaining poverty. We will also work to change narratives around gender, particularly harmful ideas of women's 'natural' role, the undervaluing of care and the use of GDP as a measure of human progress, which ignores so much. We will support the development of a narrative about the climate crisis that centres inequality and justice.

It is also important that we challenge ourselves where our own narratives are still harmful, perpetuating racist ideas of white saviourism and dependency. Narratives are not just about what is said but who is saying it, and so we need to centre the voices of partners, communities and people impacted by the patriarchy, the climate crisis and fragility.

Respect and invest in the power of people as citizens and the power of movements, unions and grassroots organisations

We must show that we believe in the power of people to effect change in their own lives and shape the world around them. This includes women's rights organizations, climate justice movements and activists and women peacebuilders. This belief must extend to ensuring that they have the funds, the freedom and the protection, if needed, to do so.

We want to change ourselves and help change the aid and development system so that more power and resources go to these groups and communities around the world. This also extends to how the humanitarian system works in times of crisis. In humanitarian or crisis situations, it is precisely communities themselves and 'first responders' who can make the most difference, and who should be listened to and included at all stages. We are piloting new ways of working with grassroots organizations and influencing donors to change their practice.

Help drive system change to fight inequality

We can't tackle it all in one go, but we can use these approaches to work with others to experiment, learn and demonstrate alternatives within specific parts of the system of poverty. In our economic justice work we want to show that the exploitation of workers - notably women, informal and unpaid workers - is part and parcel of the system of poverty and we will support efforts that build the collective power of paid and unpaid workers to disrupt economies.

In our climate justice work we want to show that those on the front line of the climate crisis are not simply people at risk but are people who are developing solutions and responses. We will focus on channelling funding away from polluters and supporting the development of just and transformative climate solutions that are determined by people on the front lines of the climate crisis. Put together, we hope to help drive economic and climate transformation that is decolonial and feminist – centring care for people and planet.

Oxfam's women's rights fund

An important first step in Oxfam's recognition of the need to evolve to meet the systemic nature of poverty and power, the Women's Rights Fund was established in 2020. The fund seeks to give women's rights organizations the predictable and flexible funding they need, along with in-kind partnership assistance, to support them as sustainable and impactful organizations.

The fund is now working with 10 partners across Kenya and the Occupied Palestinian Territories. Feedback from partners has confirmed the value of the approach to them, enabling them to invest in core needs such as office space and staff, and in particular building fundraising capacity to increase their longer-term sustainability. Flexibility has been shown to lead to innovation. For example, our partner AWIEK (Association for Women in Energy and Extractives in Kenya) have been organizing women artisanal and small miners in remote, under developed areas of Kenya. They were able to organize markets for women miners to sell their gem stones receiving at least twice the price they received from doorstep traders. AWIEK also has set up Madini Sacco, a savings platform for women miners. It provides financial access through loans to SME miners and dealers who cannot access credit facilities from commercial banks. Again this facility has allowed women miners to invest in safety equipment and hold on to their gemstones for markets thus enhancing their safety and profits.

There is much still to learn, particularly about how a large INGO can respond to the very different needs of smaller organizations in its systems. However, the approach has informed other initiatives across Oxfam, such as the delivery of flexible funding to grassroots groups and movements working on paid and unpaid care and poverty in the UK, to ensure that power is truly shifted to them and they can drive change at local and national levels.

Pledge for change

With a network of other INGOs Oxfam is a signatory of the 'Pledge for Change' which aims to 'build a stronger aid ecosystem based on the principles of solidarity, humility, self-determination, and equality'.¹⁵⁹

It pledges Oxfam to ensure:

- Equitable partnerships so that, by 2030, national and local organisations will lead humanitarian and development efforts wherever possible.
- Authentic storytelling so that Oxfam doesn't sanitize the harsh realities of conflict and poverty, but also does not portray anyone as helpless victims.
- Creating opportunities for Oxfam's partners and communities to tell their own stories.
- Influencing wider change amongst peers, philanthropists and funders and speaking out against any government policies or international action that perpetuate a colonial approach to aid and development.

Conclusion

The future must be equal

We are eight billion people, on one planet, with a finite number of resources. But we have one important other thing: each other. We are a communal and relational species: we don't thrive despite living alongside each other but because of it, and we flourish in our relationships with each other and the natural world.

We are facing a time where the need to acknowledge, invest in and reward that part of human nature and human thought is not just desirable but essential. As we encounter planetary boundaries and fragile, fractured societies, the temptation to fall into zero-sum politics and 'them' and 'us' thinking will be widespread. But this won't serve humanity well - now or in the future.

The analogy often used at this point is that humanity has two paths it can follow. And it certainly has two futures. The first is climate chaos with high-stakes inequality, where money means resources, security, health freedom and a future for the few and deepening poverty and vulnerability for the many. The second is a just transition to a climate-safe future and a system that drives a regenerative green and caring future for all.

But this analogy is misleading, implying we have a free choice. In reality we are being pushed down the path to chaos and it will take united resistance and determination to forge a different future.

Getting started is the important thing. We have to start, learn by trying, and create together.

Making peace by Denise Levertov

A voice from the dark called out,
 'The poets must give us
imagination of peace, to oust the intense, familiar
imagination of disaster. Peace, not only
the absence of war.'

 But peace, like a poem,
is not there ahead of itself,
can't be imagined before it is made,
can't be known except
in the words of its making,
grammar of justice,
syntax of mutual aid.

 A feeling towards it,
dimly sensing a rhythm, is all we have
until we begin to utter its metaphors,
learning them as we speak.

 A line of peace might appear
if we restructured the sentence our lives are making,
revoked its reaffirmation of profit and power,
questioned our needs, allowed
long pauses . . .

 A cadence of peace might balance its weight
on that different fulcrum; peace, a presence,
an energy field more intense than war,
might pulse then,
stanza by stanza into the world,
each act of living
one of its words, each word
a vibration of light—facets
of the forming crystal.

Denise Levertov, 'Making Peace' from *Breathing the Water*.
Copyright ©1987 by Denise Levertov

Notes

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³⁴ During the worst of the pandemic, income losses among the poorest 40% of humanity were twice as large as among the richest 20% (World Bank. (2022). Poverty and Shared Prosperity 2022, op. cit.). Then while high-income economies bounced back in 2021, poorer economies did not, partly because they had no access to the vaccines needed. When food prices rise, the impacts are unequal between countries – some low-income countries have experienced inflation well above the world average. The impacts are also unequal within countries. Those living in poverty are hardest hit as they typically spend around two-thirds of their resources on food. In every region, women are more food-insecure than men (M. Christensen et al. (2023). Survival of the Richest, op. cit.).

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