

THERE IS NO THEM, JUST US

Ending the system of poverty for us all
Summary



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.

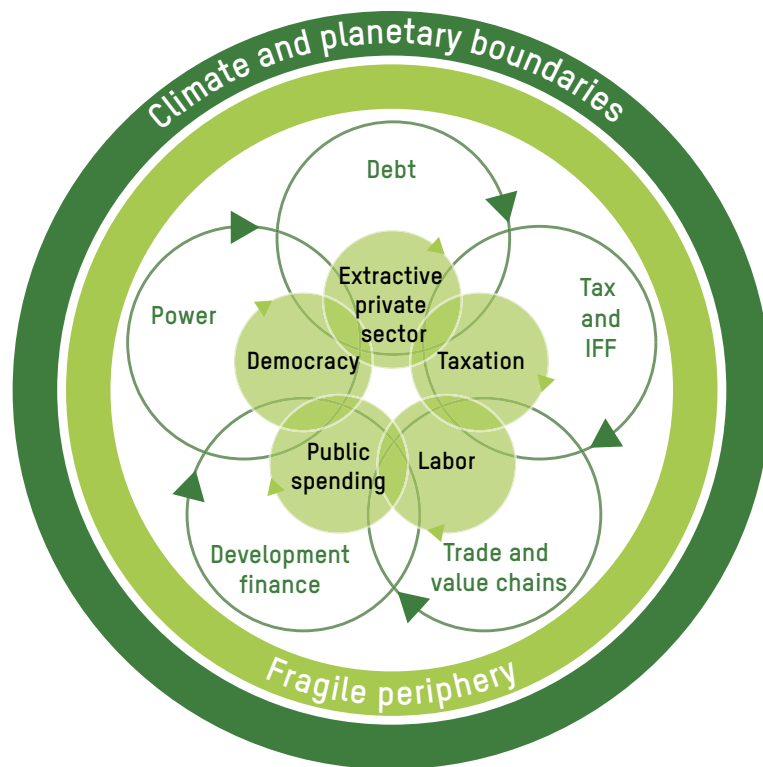
Oxfam's Commitment to Inequality Index has charted policy decisions from over 160 governments across many of the policy areas that have the greatest impact on inequality – from the design of tax policy to labor laws and practices to investment in public services.⁸ The results differ from place to place,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

Notes

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Oxfam is an international confederation of 21 organizations, working with its partners and allies, reaching out to millions of people around the world. Together, we tackle inequalities to end poverty and injustice, now and in the long term – for an equal future. Please write to any of the agencies for further information or visit www.oxfam.org.

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