

SASH: How would you define poverty?

FW: I think what emerged from the Carnegie Inquiry, which involved at least 450 people from all over southern Africa, was that poverty could not be reduced to a single number any more than illness to a temperature. A number gives you some information but doesn't really help you to diagnose what is wrong.

If you know, as we know in South Africa today, that two-thirds of families are living below the minimum level, it's a very serious fact but it doesn't help you in terms of strategies. However, if you know that two-thirds of families don't have access to electricity and yet it is one of the cheapest forms of energy and South Africa carries excess capacity because we're putting some of our power stations into mothballs, that tells you some very serious things about strategies and the whole political economy in the country.

So the first part of the book and one of the major thrusts of the Inquiry itself with the 300 papers that came from the highways and byways of South Africa was to tell in real detail what poverty meant to people.

Could you describe the extent of poverty in southern Africa?

One can divide the economy into four parts.

First there are the major metropolitan areas, then there are the reserves and we hear a great deal about both of those. Then there is also the platteland which is that 80 per cent of South Africa about which few people do much thinking. Yet it is the area where one-fifth of black South Africans live under very acute poverty.

The fourth area is those countries around the edge which are, in international terms, different countries but very tied to South Africa. Lesotho and Mozambique are key examples.

If we look at the metropolitan areas, where there is much more money around, perhaps the major manifestation of poverty is overcrowding and appalling housing.

When you go to the reserves you

find a lack of basic needs such as clean drinking water or fuel although, paradoxically, shelter is quite good.

One surprising aspect of the reserves is the extent of inequality between rich and poor not because the rich are particularly rich but because the poor are so desperately poor and have no cattle, land, pensions, or money coming in from anywhere.

Another aspect of the reserves is the sheer population density. If you look at the rural platteland, the average density is about six people per square km. In rural reserves it is about 57 which is ten times as many. And that varies widely. The Free State has 11 people per square km. Ciskei, which is certainly no better agriculturally, has 82 people per square km. The population of Qwa-Qwa, which was about 6 000 in

uprooting poverty

'Uprooting Poverty: The South African Challenge' is co-authored by Francis Wilson and Mamphela Ramphele. Due for release in January, it is the main report of the Second Carnegie Inquiry into Poverty and Development in Southern Africa, which first came to public attention during a conference in 1984. The book draws together all the basic information about poverty that came out of the Inquiry and devotes several chapters to causes of poverty and strategies against it. In the absence of Dr Ramphele (who is on sabbatical leave), SASH interviewed Professor Wilson, director of the Southern African Labour Development Research Unit (Saldru) at the University of Cape Town, who outlined some of the issues raised in the book.

The photograph on the right, taken by Guy Tillim in Crossroads this year, appears on the cover of the book.





1916, and 23 000 in 1970, stood at between 300 000 and 500 000 in 1985!

Those people are not there because of population growth but because of the whole process of conquest - the Land Act of 1913 and the Bantustan policy which has forced people off farms and out of the cities through resettlement and the anti-urbanisation policy of this government.

What emerged from the Carnegie Inquiry is the appalling poverty in the platteland. Don't forget about the platteland. People thrown off farms are really trapped in small towns with no jobs and very little income particularly if they're African.

In places like Lesotho and Mozambique there is the fear of being cut off from an industrial economy which, through migrant

labour, people have helped to build.

And, of course, unemployment pervades all these areas. One of the most haunting things of the inquiry was the verbatim accounts of men and women talking about what it meant to be unemployed. It is not so much the hunger, although that is very real, but the sense of uselessness that really bites people.

How have you described the history and origins of poverty in the region?

We've tried to tackle the question of causes in three ways starting with the kind of things economists worry about - inflation, recession, the slowing down of the economy, lack of economic growth, population growth - the macro-economic forces.

The second set of causes we need to understand is how apartheid has influenced poverty. Looking at aspects of state policy since 1948 we find the anti-urbanisation policy, resettlement, Bantu education, the smashing of organisations and destabilisation have clearly had a devastating effect on the very poor of this society.

The third aspect is to go pre-1948 to deal with 300 years of colonial history since 1652. We say you need to understand that conquest was a fact and remains with us in the form of the Land Act, that slavery was a fact and remained with us for centuries in the form of the pass laws whose consequences are still with us because that's what made the migrant-labour system possible.

We've tried to trace those parts of our history which are impinging on the present. Clearly the distribution of land has got everything to do with who is rich and who is poor which is not quite the same thing as saying that a redistribution would put everything right.

The migrant-labour system effectively impoverished the rural areas over the century which, again, is not to say that to end the migrant-labour system would make the rural areas rich. It won't.

The Group Areas Act we describe as a piece of scaffolding

which was put into place in order to help build the apartheid edifice, to keep the centre of the city white and blacks on the edges. Once that's in place for 30 or 40 years, you have set a particular pattern to your city.

So much of what's happened in South African history has to do with scaffolding of this kind. You take away the scaffolding but the building remains intact. That is the problem we are going to face in the new South Africa.

Have the poor benefited at all from the process of technological development in South Africa?

Technological development, with its capacity to produce goods at lower costs, has resulted in the diffusion of material goods, such as clothing, throughout the society and this has also reached poor people, although the very poor rarely have access to the benefits deriving from technological progress.

It is, however, important to note that during the 1970s, real wages rose for a substantial portion of black South Africans and there was a shift in the distribution of income from whites to blacks. The one employment category for which we have statistics in which the opposite trend has occurred is domestic service. Real wages of domestic workers fell by 16 per cent during the same period.

What about South Africa in the context of sub-Saharan Africa? Is there any point in such comparisons?

One of the things we've tried to do in this book is to situate South Africa as part of sub-Saharan Africa. In the first instance South Africa's wealth has got everything to do with labour that came in from Mozambique or Lesotho; Malawi, Botswana, Zambia, or Tanzania.

Also, South Africa has been industrialising since 1867 and a large proportion of our population lives in urban areas compared to most of the rest of Africa which is still rural, although places like Zambia are urbanising very fast.

The per capita income in South

Africa on average is very much higher than the rest of sub-Saharan Africa until you start looking at African income inside South Africa particularly in the reserves. If you look at other indicators like infant mortality you find huge variations between black and white and within the black part of South Africa. But when you look at places like Transkei, infant mortality is considerably worse than, for example, Zimbabwe.

There's a tremendous amount we have to learn from the history of the last 15 to 20 years in Africa both from what has been achieved and from the mistakes that have been made. We've tried to point to some of those issues towards the end of the book.

Has a stronger union movement altered the situation in any way?

We argue that the unions are fundamental to any strategies for change and for dealing with poverty in our society.

The best way to explain this is to sketch very briefly how one needs to look at strategies. First of all, fundamental political change has to happen if you're serious about tackling poverty in South Africa.

But we focus on two other issues which we also think are important. One is what can be done under present political conditions that will make a difference to the lives of the poor, keeping long-term objectives in mind.

Secondly, if it were possible to wave a magic wand and move to a non-racial democratic South Africa, what economic policies would be able to deal with poverty given a history that one can't change?

Land reform, nationalisation and all those issues need to be thought through now. There needs to be an interaction between the short-run strategies within non-governmental organisations and long-run strategies looking at what a non-racial, democratic government would be doing to counter poverty.

It's in this context that we talk about the unions and say that the rise of the unions in the 70s and 80s has without doubt brought about a

major shift in the balance of power inside South Africa.

Where does that leave the unemployed?

That's an extremely important question.

One of the questions the unions have to focus on is whether their activities are exacerbating the situation of the unemployed. Our assessment at this stage is no. The unions are working to break down barriers rather than build them.

The danger of the unions becoming a kind of elitist group is always there, as it is with any power group in a society, but this particular power structure is fundamentally necessary to the process of political change without which nothing is going to happen as far as the poor are concerned in this country.

What about immediate action?

In the immediate term the heart of the strategy to overcome poverty lies in establishing and building non-governmental organisations such as trade unions, co-operatives, and rural and urban projects of various kinds. These are the kinds of organisations that can make a difference to people's lives and build a base for transforming our society.

Non-governmental organisations are not peripheral to the struggle, they are essential to it and they must be thought through as part of the long-term process.

One of the top priorities for any organisation must be finding ways of enabling people to find more jobs because unemployment is right at the heart of our problem - particularly for women.

It might be interesting for an organisation like the Black Sash to look very carefully at the experience of Latin America and Asia regarding the role of different types of credit organisations in providing credit to very poor women in a way that doesn't burden them with debt but enables them to release their own energies to create jobs and income for themselves. □