

BEGGING AS A MEANS OF LIVELIHOOD: CONFERRING WITH THE POOR AT THE ORTHODOX RELIGIOUS CEREMONIAL DAYS IN ADDIS ABABA

Woubishet Demewozu

Department of Sociology and Social Anthropology, Addis Ababa University

ABSTRACT The present ethnographic account, written with insight and sympathy, of the life and problems of the poorest beggars examines life on the street corner, a frontier that was beginning to be made to forcedly and violently vanish by the government after the field work for this study was completed. As such, attempts were made to picture the life of the urban poor on the streets and churchyards of Addis Ababa, the capital of Ethiopia.

The problem of beggary has a lot to do with the country's socio-economic and historical trajectories of poverty characterized by low incomes, high unemployment rates, fast-rising cost of living, high rates of population growth, inappropriate public policies and continued rural-urban migration and displacement. The beggars as impoverished underclass presently find themselves in extreme and multifaceted destitution: chronic food shortage and insecurity, illiteracy, homelessness or poor housing often on unsuitable land, disease, unsanitary living conditions, death and above all marginalization and exclusion. The actions and reactions of the destitute beggars are largely restricted to their own habitat; in the social milieu in which they are surviving by themselves within the limits of the larger society by which they are surrounded, from which they are, in large part, outcasts. Social interactions, lacking depth both in the past and in the present, are reflected in terms of support, competition and conflict.

Ownership of the poverty agenda, short-term and long-term planning and programming, and sustainability are not likely to come about unless people, and particularly the elites are aware of the dimensions of the problem, have considered and discussed the many causes involved, and have themselves developed programmes and organizational structures for monitoring poverty and implementing pro-poor policies.

Key Words: Begging; Means of livelihood; Conferring with the poor; Orthodox religious ceremonial days; Addis Ababa.

INTRODUCTION

In the wider international context, literature on the problem of beggary is scanty. The limited scholarly works largely focused on micro analysis. Thus, there seems to be a wide gap in the social science literature regarding concepts, theoretical frameworks and methodological approaches to the study of the socio-economic aspects of the problem of beggary. In addition, the limited researches undertaken so far were basically survey-oriented attempts, which heavily lean toward understanding the beggary problem following quantitative approaches. One of the most serious problems with such a profile is that it draws a flat, static picture. It does not provide insight into the dynamics of the problem (Bevan & Achilles, 1995). Above all, most of the studies lack ideological and

political neutrality to expose the beggary problem from the point of view of the victims.

In Ethiopia, the problem of beggary has been given little attention so far (MOLSA, 1992; Solomon, 1993). We find very limited literature (Pankhurst, 1972; Llife, 1987) which directly focused on the beggary problem. The problem has been also largely addressed by small- or large-scale survey researches providing statistical analysis. The macro approaches sought to examine the quantifiable characteristics of the beggars using such indicators as age, sex, educational level, ethnic background, etc. at a particular moment in time. Although the qualitative approach cannot be said to be wholly absent in past researches, the literature fails to analyze fully and qualitatively the overall situation of beggars.

The objective of this research is therefore to fill the gap and to compensate for the imbalance by utilizing qualitative and ethnographic analysis of the beggary problem in the framework of the dynamics of the socio-economic history of the country at large. The purpose of the study is to give a voice to people who are rarely heard, and to provide the reader with an inside view of a style of life which is reflected in many of the impoverished groups. Indeed, this research, meant to bridge the gap in communication between the very poor and other people and agencies, may lead to a more sympathetic view of the beggars and their problems and provide a rational basis for constructive social action.

DISCUSSION OF MAJOR FINDINGS

The world of beggars like any other way of life is full of challenges, plans and aspirations meanings, symbols, prejudice, skills, techniques, conflicts, etc. The Orthodox Religious Ceremonial days (days of the Saints) and places and the temple environs are the stages where the beggar population exhibit their skills as actors and dramatists. Begging is a business, which demands commitment, competitiveness, tactfulness and alertness. The fit survive and the novice and the uncompetitive lose in the social contest for the scarce resource, the alms. Begging as a social event presupposes a convenient social setting, a potentially responsive, relatively large number of passers-by, a dramatic presentation by beggars, justifiable evidence for responding to the beggars, and a tacit, socially recognized level of understanding and usually wordless communication between the beggars and the begged from.

The current beggary problem in Ethiopia has to be seen on the basis of some natural and man-made factors that have occurred over time. It is therefore misleading to dwell solely on synchronic description and try to depict the beggary problem on the basis of partial events and specific periods in time. To know about the condition of beggary is thus to learn the Ethiopian historical situation at large. As such, closer scrutiny of the trajectories of the natural factors, the economy, demography and public policy, show how these developments have converged to create chronic poverty and the consequent widespread problem of beggary.

The driving dynamic force behind the beggary problem today is the widening gap between the cost of basic needs and the resources available. Many people these days seem to be sinking ever deeper toward the bottom, the limbo of poverty. And poverty is the most frequent precipitant of the problem of beggary. Beneath poverty lies the widespread scarcity of resources needed to lead a proper life. Beneath that lies a socio-economic system becoming more concentrated with the evils of urbanization owing to migration and displacement of a mass of human beings who have nowhere else to go but to the streets. The plight of the beggars, concentrated more in urban areas particularly in Addis Ababa is becoming worse rather than better. The problem of urban poverty, as some people say, will continue to grow as the costs of living rise and the stocks for low- and middle-income urban dwellers shrink. But poverty is not confined to urban areas. Today, thousands of rural people who could not make a living due to recurrent famine and drought are constantly shoved off their land and are forced to take to the streets of urban areas. For some people, the position of these farmers will continue to worsen, aggravating the problem of beggary. In this respect, the beggars are not the result of individual character defects but largely complex flaws in the socio-economic system that marginalized them.

Despite the diverse and complex nature of the beggary problem, an initial possible categorization of the destitute under study can be offered: resource-poor urban-dwellers; people under conditions of contingency, including orphans, people with different disabilities and disaster victims; and policy-related displacees, such as the retrenched, demobilized soldiers, and war affected people. This categorization may provide a basis for analyzing possible social action arising out of shared interests and experiences, for public debate, and for policy action at macro and local levels. In fact, it is clear that individuals may fall into more than one of the categories as they are obviously not exhaustive and exclusive. More importantly, however, we need to know roughly how many destitute and poor people fall into each category in order to establish the size of the policy problem. This kind of analysis should, in future, be done using large-scale surveys, supplemented by qualitative research.

As a result of the threat of widespread marginalization and exclusion, the beggars struggle to maintain or establish a viable social interaction among themselves. The modes of social interaction in the form of interpersonal relations enable the beggars to amend their loss of social articulation. As such, among others, factors like ethnic and/or district background, gender and age play a basic role in composing and patterning the beggars' informal social relationships and in determining the choice of friends. Because of their impoverishment, varied forms of 'associational' or 'institutional' ties do not exist among the beggars. For the most part *ikub* (a form of savings and credit association) stands out as the most important and the only institution in the beggar communities. Of course, some are heard saying that there is a strong sign that even among the city dwellers due to chronic poverty many people are being forced to quit voluntary social institutions such as *idir* (a burial association) because of

the incapacity to afford to pay their monthly contributions. It is in light of this that it becomes very difficult and even impossible for the poorest beggars to have organized themselves in associations. This made the operation of personal relations for support all the more important.

As Liebow (1968) once set forth, transience is perhaps the most striking and pervasive characteristic of this street-corner world. It characterizes not only the subtler social relationships but also the more obvious spatial relationships of those within the network of interlocking and overlapping personal communities at any given time but also the movement into and out of these networks. Thus, this street-corner world does not at all fit the traditional characterization of the lower-class people as a tightly-knit community whose members share the feeling that "we are all in this together". Nor does it seem profitable- especially for those who would see it changed, to look at it as a self-supporting, on-going social system with its own distinctive "design for living," principles of organization, and system of values. Thus, it is important to note that within the area of their own social environment, the beggars do not have a distinct and independent community with its own unique economic, cultural, and socio-political institutions.

IMPLICATIONS AND FUTURE CONSIDERATIONS

In the long run, of course, poverty is dysfunctional, not only for the poor themselves, but also for others as well. It creates all sorts of social problems that upset the social order. Those poor who cannot be economically productive will become dependent on other members of society. Apart from beggary, prostitution, vagrancy, crime, illness, malnutrition and unemployment are social diseases for which the body politic must ultimately pay a price. The system as it exists now does virtually nothing to cure them. Among the poor, the beggars-women, children, the disabled and the aged-have suffered most. Thousands have taken to the streets because they lost their stable existence and livelihood due to famine or civil eviction. Others have been forced out of their homes to beg simply because living costs have risen. Still others move closer each day to the brink of beggarly existence. In a nutshell, the findings of this study seem to indicate conclusively that the beggary problem is an aspect of the larger problems of poverty and that any fundamental solution is national.

Nearly all beggars live on the charity of citizens. The traditional way of giving charity as a matter of fact encouraged the able-bodied beggars to take advantage of it together with the genuinely needy. While the intention of an alms-giver may be good, the beneficiary is not always likely to be a genuinely needy person. Many people believe that giving in charity is meritorious and the unscrupulous able-bodied professional beggars exploit their faith. But charity should be practiced for the welfare of the community. People must give through a sense of social responsibility to the needy members of the society. Care must be taken to ensure the welfare of the receiver through help and it must never

result in his continuous dependence on the society. It must be admitted that if a good part of the sums of the charity was used in an organized manner, the needs of the genuinely needy could be met better and to a larger extent, and the professional beggars would be discouraged. As such, organized charity is tantamount to a means test that discourages all but our compatriots truly in need. In organized charity, every need is investigated, assessed, and then meaningfully met. The alms-giver must therefore realize the importance of channeling charity through organized channels. There would always be opportunities to practice charity, but what is suggested here is that to contribute to human welfare through organized programmes is a more effective way of relieving human suffering. The traditional way of giving charity in an unorganized manner will not be able to solve the problem. A multi-pronged attack is necessary to combat this complex problem.

Overall, poverty has become a major aspect of a wider social and economic crisis afflicting Ethiopia. And the poverty crisis in Ethiopia is very complex and has affected all strata and sectors of society, its dynamics have been shaped by inter-locking economic, social, political and natural factors interacting through time. As such, there is no short-range solution for it. By and large, poverty is a political matter as much as an economic one. It is embedded in unequal economic, political and socio-cultural relations, and transmitted through generations. It is something experienced by people as they pass through life and involves a range of deprivations, processes and relationships, some of which are more amenable to possible policy interventions than others. A strategy for poverty reduction with any chance of success must be a long-term one. It requires integrated attacks on many fronts, including the legal, political and cultural and particularly the organizational as well as the economic. Such a strategy cannot be developed as a technical matter - it is political and involves values, interests and public discussion, which must come from the Ethiopian people themselves.

Given an Ethiopian commitment to poverty reduction, economic and socio-logical and/or anthropological analysis can play vital roles in the development of efficient, equitable and implementable policies and research programs geared toward poverty reduction. In doing so, it is important to identify the poor, the vulnerable, those getting poorer, and the strategies of these people. Only a multilateral, comprehensive and well-designed program for prevention and treatment of beggary, and of course poverty, backed by coordinated action and handled with sensitivity, will bring the problem under control. To these ends, efforts of government and non-government organizations and individuals should be stretched to the limit and emphasize the need for a national commitment in the long run.

In a nutshell, the beggars huddled in the darkness of the cold street are our other selves. They are the reflection of our own insecurity; they are the face of our impoverishment. These urban exiles recall something that seems to be missing from ourselves: well-being. They challenge us to reach out, to forge our socio-economic well-being, to imagine ourselves in their place. In the final analysis, the way to prevent poverty in general and beggary in particular is to create an improved socio-economic and political system.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Research into poverty is needed at all levels of Ethiopian society. There is a danger that research by professionals is guided by the professional interests (both academic and promotional) of the researcher, rather than the needs of those being researched. The knowledge local people generate may be of benefit to no one but to the author of papers and books (Edwards, 1994). Knowledge is also a source of power, and if concentrated in the hands of elites, it is less likely to be used in the service of poverty reduction. Another aspect of this kind of research is that local knowledge is devalued (Bevan & Achilles, 1995). It is therefore important to pay as much attention to the process whereby knowledge is generated (and ways in which this might be done which are really beneficial to the participants) and disseminated and to involve all possible levels of Ethiopian society.

So far, there are no great efforts at the state level on the right to shelter, social welfare entitlements and other services to the beggars. Paradoxically enough, most activity at the state level has been geared toward dislocating and evicting the very poorest. In this respect, the most salient conclusion of the study is that government has been making beggars out of its concern. In this regard, efforts should be dedicated, at least temporarily, to make the urban environment human and humane, to make the geographical entity in which so many beggars and other destitute reside livable, to avoid the dangers inherent in the hostility and alienation which proceed from insecurity and external threat, anxiety and powerlessness, and to guarantee that the poorest beggars do not live as part of an amorphous mass nameless, faceless and anonymous.

Although prevention of the beggary problem has a lot to do with improving the socio-economic condition of the country at large and alleviating poverty, the state and other stake holders should move ahead and should do their level best to provide certain kinds of short-lived assistance and relief services by establishing welfare programs rather than exerting a vigorous pressure and adding fuel to the already existing downward spiral. Hence, relief efforts must not cease entirely. They not only alleviate real suffering, but also serve to neutralize the potential threat of discontent. But there might be a danger that charity can actually be a means of perpetuating the problem by throwing money at the poor without changing the conditions and systems that promote poverty. In the long run, therefore, programs should be designed not only to alleviate but also to prevent poverty. Job training, expanded educational opportunities for the disadvantaged members of society, and programs to improve rural conditions and involving participation of the poor in controlling their own communities should be an integral part of the war against poverty. As such, the social programs to be designed should not be in the form of incentives to the poor to live gratuitously; rather they should help them toil for their bread. The focus must be on the economy getting better. This means more effective planning of human and economic resources and better distribution of goods and services.

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Author's Name and Address: Woubishet Demewozu Tebeje, *Department of Sociology and Social Anthropology, Addis Ababa University, ETHIOPIA.*
E-mail: Woubshetd@yahoo.com

