

# **ERADICATING POVERTY: THE ILLIBERAL REALITY OF STRUCTURAL ADJUSTMENT PROGRAMS**

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**MS#: 70**

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# Eradicating Poverty: The Illiberal Reality of Structural Adjustment Programs

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## ABSTRACT:

*An understanding of the contextual nature of poverty has implications for responses that seek to improve social status and economic well-being. This issue is particularly relevant in developing countries where the dynamic causes, symptoms, severity, and persistence of poverty are often under investigated and remedies deemed unresponsive. This paper explores the implications of using a “one size fits all approach” to eradicating poverty and postulates that effective anti-poverty programs must be based upon a sound understanding of the local context of a country. The aim of this paper is to stimulate critical debate and discussion of the ways in which the multidimensional and context specific causes of poverty can be integrated into dynamic and comprehensive perspectives on poverty eradication as a modification to the prevailing neo-liberal prescription in developing countries.*

Keywords: Poverty, Inequality, Vulnerability, Caribbean, Participatory Approach, Structural Adjustment Programs, Neo-liberalism. Track Global Poverty and Underemployment

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The views expressed in this paper are exclusively those of the authors.

# I. INTRODUCTION – DEFINING THE CAUSES OF POVERTY

Neo-liberal approaches to poverty alleviation, as prescribed by structural adjustment initiatives that modify macroeconomic policies in impoverished nations, are intended to spur growth, yet a fundamental observation exists that the neo-liberal prescription has functioned to increase poverty. Proponents of this view argue that policy and programs based on neo-liberal ideology tend to include rhetoric supporting the movement of the poor toward self-sufficiency and independence, yet in reality by focusing on the poor as the root of the problem, these types of initiatives have served to increase dependency rather than creating the gains they promised (Kilty and Segal, 2004). The International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank have prescribed structural adjustment policies that notably cutback in health, education and other vital social services around the world as a condition for loans and repayment. In conjunction with these cutbacks, the structural adjustment policies in support of globalization and free trade open up the economies, resources, labor, markets and competition among the developing countries as well as with more powerful and established industrialized nations.

On one hand the ideology of globalization and neo-liberalism, through structural adjustment lending, at its best opens up international trade markets for export-led growth opportunities to developing countries. Conversely, the same ideology in some cases has led to increased poverty and resulted in situations where, “to attract investment, poor countries enter a spiraling race to the bottom to see who can provide lower standards, reduced wages and cheaper resources. This has increased poverty and inequality for most people. It also forms a backbone to what we today call globalization. As a result, it maintains the historic unequal rules of trade” (Shah, 2007).

An ideological shift in the rhetoric of structural adjustment programs to emphasize poverty eradication and human development through the poverty reduction and growth facility (PRGF) occurred in 1999, yet neo-liberalism and globalization have fallen short on commitments to combat poverty. . Ideally macroeconomic growth was to occur with a critical eye on the poverty line, yet by eliminating the trade barriers of poorer countries (in the form of regulating their exports and encouraging imports), while maintaining their own, wealthy Western countries have functioned to produce increasing levels of economic disparity and vulnerability in developing countries across the globe, (Stiglitz, 2003, 6).

While it could be argued that other factors also have contributed to the conditions of developing countries, it must be acknowledged that in spite of structural adjustment policies and the commitment of the powers that support them, poverty has persisted in urban and rural communities worldwide. Despite the intentions of the prevailing neo-liberal consciousness, poverty continues to manifest globally as hunger and malnutrition; illness and related morbidity and mortality; limited or lack of access to basic education, sanitation and social services; homelessness and inadequate housing; crime; social isolation; and economic, political, social and cultural marginalization (United Nations,1995). The mass of well-intentioned investments in public policies and interventions across the globe has yet to yield a definitive response to the problem of how to alleviate poverty.

This paper seeks to assess the neo-liberal response to the “poverty problem” by focusing on the Latin American and Caribbean country of Belize. The motivation for this study is that Belize represents a case where their relationship with the International Monetary Fund (IMF) was characterized by economic growth with no shift in the level of poverty. This paper argues that the neo-liberal prescription as illustrated by structural adjustment policy in Belize while helping to spur macroeconomic development, failed to address the need to respond to the context specific nature and manifestations of poverty. While the manifestations of poverty may share characteristics and can be described in trends across regions and globally, the root causes of poverty are determined by factors that uniquely evolve and persist as a result of social, historical, economic, and political relationships and conditions within specific contexts.

## II. THE DISTINCT FACE OF POVERTY IN BELIZE

Belize is a relatively young nation in terms of sovereignty, having gained independence from the British in 1981 almost 20 years after forerunners in the Caribbean such as Jamaica and Barbados. Belize is also young in terms of population; over half of the country’s total population of 282,000 is under the age of 18. The poor represent

approximately 33% of the total population, which is equivalent to a quarter of all households in Belize. Poverty assessments conducted in Belize in 1996 and 2002 revealed a consistent trend; despite periods of rapid macroeconomic growth (especially between 1989 and 1992 when the economy grew at an average of 9% yearly), the level of poverty in Belize has essentially remained the same since 1995 (Johnson, 2005).

Significant levels of poverty affects diverse groups within the country based upon race, gender, culture, and geography. Youth are particularly vulnerable with 31.6% living in impoverished conditions. Persons in rural areas are also adversely affected with 44.2% in poverty compared to 23.7% of persons living in urban areas. Of the four primary ethnic groups in Belize (Creole, Mestizo, Garifuna, and Maya) poverty is most prevalent among the Maya, particularly those who reside in rural areas of the Toledo district. The poverty rate in Toledo has increased by over 20% since 1996 to affect 79% of the district's population by 2002.

While men and women were equally likely to represent 1 out of every 3 people in the population that experience poverty, women were likely to experience poverty for longer durations. Female heads of household were also more likely than male heads of household to be poor at 30.5% and 23.6% respectively. Disparities in the experience of poverty between males and females may be partially due to the legacy of slavery that continues to reinforce inequality in labor force participation based upon gender.

In 2002, the national labour force participation rate for males was almost three times the rate of females (at 87.4% and 30.3% respectively). The gendered division of labour in Belize is the product of complex socio-cultural forces that can be traced back to the period of logwood and mahogany cutting in the 18th century. During the period of slavery, African and free-coloured men worked outside of the home cutting logwood and mahogany in the forests and were separated from their families for seven to eight months of the year. The 1834 Census shows that women's occupations were primarily that of domestics, while men's work was generally woodcutting. This division of labour that proved profitable during slavery was re-enforced after emancipation, and contributed to the ascribed gender roles of the male as the principal provider or breadwinner and the woman as domestic and caregiver. This division of labour, with women primarily as unpaid or underpaid domestics and caregivers, that proved profitable during slavery was reinforced after emancipation, and has resulted in a trend of women's economic devaluation, dependency, and deficiency (Shoman, 1990; Bolland, 1977; McClaurin, 1993).

The employment rates for males and females have remained relatively the same as they were 20 years ago. By 2005, the employment rates of males and females at 92% and 42.9% respectively were relatively the same as those in 1984 at 90% for males and 41.6% for females (Byrd and Bernard, 2006). This trend persists despite the recent educational advances of women. Females in Belize have currently achieved higher rates of enrollment and graduation at secondary and tertiary levels than males, yet for every one male that is in the labor force there are three females that are not. Chronic unemployment figures provide a graphic indication of the pronounced effect of gender inequality on the feminization of poverty, as women are almost twice as likely as men to be out of work for 12 or more years.

The population and economy in Belize are particularly vulnerable to natural disasters and economic shocks. Hurricanes Keith, Iris and Chantal affected tourism and agricultural industries and road infrastructure requiring over BZ \$50 million in reconstruction costs in the 2000 – 2003 fiscal period (IMF, 2005). Regional competition, the lack of significant diversification beyond agricultural production and tourism, and an over dependence on external trade, coupled with the loss of preferential market access to Europe, reinforces Belize's vulnerability to economic shocks (IMF, 2005).

Belize's economic vulnerability has encouraged the rapid accumulation of public debt and limits the country's ability to provide basic social services and infrastructure improvements. Between 1999 and 2004, public debt increased by approximately US\$600 million, exceeding 100 percent of GDP by the end of 2004 (IMF, 2005). This increase in public debt occurred in tandem with the political administration's reinstatement of a state-owned finance corporation and the implementation of a neo-liberal strategy to accelerate macroeconomic growth through tax cuts and credit to the private sector. During this time the GDP growth that was evident in 2000 at 12% subsequently slowed to between 4 to 5% (IMF, 2005). By 2005, public debt had reached 100% of the GDP and the state-owned finance corporation had been declared insolvent (IMF, 2005).

Poverty in Belize is a multi-faceted outcome of complex and context specific social, economic, political, and cultural factors impacting the experience of individuals who lack material wealth sufficient to meet basic needs. Within the population, women that are heads of households, particularly those that live in rural areas, and their children, are among the most vulnerable. In Belize, the following major routes into poverty are prevalent for women: a lack of labor force participation, unemployment, under employment, sex typed positions that are associated with low pay and unfavorable working conditions, absent and negligent fathers, and an unequal distribution of labor within the home. For men, women, and children the trends indicate that the most vulnerable are those living in rural areas or under resourced and high crime urban enclaves, those with limited education, those with limited participation in the political, social and economic decision making processes, and those who lack the capacity and support needed to stabilize and recover from natural disasters and economic shocks.

Each route into poverty is paved by a history that can be traced back to colonialism, cultural traditions, and social, economic and political nuances that combine to distinctly manifest as the Belizean poverty context. Each of these contextual factors carries with it a host of implications for structural interventions seeking to eradicate poverty. A comprehensive understanding of the context-specific characteristics of poverty in a country affects how the public and policy makers view the plight of the poor and is an essential pre-requisite to their ability to affect responsive policy.

### **III. MACROECONOMIC MYOPIA AND THE MISALIGNMENT OF STRUCTURAL ADJUSTMENT PROGRAMS**

The mission of the IMF is to help member countries achieve sustained economic growth. Belize's relationship with the IMF began in 1982 when it became a member country. Financial support is provided by the IMF to member countries through a variety of services and lending strategies. In 1984, Belize received \$7.13 million in a standby account, which is intended to provide countries with short-term financial assistance. An analysis of the IMF reports from 1997 to 2007 reveals their history of a neo-liberal approach to poverty eradication and their concern regarding Belize's economic stability.

In 1997, the IMF reported that Belize's economic performance weakened in between 1991 and 1994 in response to a fall in public sector savings (IMF, 1997). While the government's strategy to reduce the civil service by 9 percent in 1995 was recognized by the IMF as favorable, the benefits were offset by a wage increase for civil servants in 1996. The IMF followed with recommendations for the implementation of several prudent policies that would reduce and monitor public sector spending to strengthen the weakened economy and boost Belize's fiscal sustainability. From 1995 through 1999, the government of Belize failed to heed IMF warnings to reduced public sector spending, refrain from external borrowing from commercial lenders, and cease using proceeds from privatization to finance a burgeoning fiscal debt (IMF, 2000).

A new administration was installed in 1999. The devaluation of the country's fixed exchange rate of \$2 BZ to \$1 US was a constant threat from 2000 to 2007, as the tendency of political authorities to selectively heed IMF warnings continued. In 2000 the IMF warned the government of Belize against starting program in which the state-owned finance corporation would be slated to construct and sell mortgages for more than 10,000 homes. With a need to deliver on the promise of jobs and housing as primary concerns, counter to the IMF's advice, the government forged ahead with its plans.

Counter to the tenets of structural adjustment, the use of funds secured through privatization and burgeoning public debt occurred in a climate of corruption. According to the Heritage Foundation's Index of Economic Freedom the perception of corruption is significant in Belize (Kane et al, 2007). Public concern about the mounting external debt and government corruption reached critical points in 2004 and 2005, as political authorities failed to deliver on agreements with labor unions and social partners for greater transparency in fiscal decision making. Added to public scrutiny were fuel prices that had reached unprecedented amounts, increasing numbers of violent crimes, and a reduction in prices for the country's chief exports, sugar and bananas. Nationwide strikes that crippled the country for several days at a time were called by trade unions periodically during 2004 and 2005.

By 2005, the IMF urged the Belizean government to halt the operations of the insolvent finance corporation and focus its growth efforts on tax reform and restructuring the country's external debt. With the imminent threat of devaluation becoming increasingly viewed as a reality by the public, opposition and political leadership, the IMF warnings were eventually heeded. In 2007, with the support of the IMF, the Inter-American Development Bank and the Caribbean Development Bank, Belize completed a debt exchange program that provided its foreign commercial creditors with the option converting debt into bonds that would begin amortizing in 2019 and reach maturity in 2029. While the fiscal crisis in Belize to some extent is temporarily redressed, the probability exists that the subsequent administration will inherit and pass on the responsibility for the legacy of debt accumulated over previous decades to the next generation of political leaders and constituents. Continued challenges are expected, yet the IMF is hailing Belize's progress as a significant step toward restoring the nation's macroeconomic environment to a sustainable level that promotes social progress (IMF, 2007).

While the IMF reports provide detailed descriptions of the macroeconomic indicators of development, the myopic focus on economic structural adjustment ignores measures of social progress or poverty. The IMF reports indicate that the government's goal to spur macroeconomic growth was achieved to some degree from 1995 through 2007, yet the gains were generally offset by fiscal mismanagement. The reports do not list indicators of the country's status in regard to social progress and poverty reduction.

Although political authorities in Belize were selective in their response to the IMF prescription, some effort was made to respond to the contextual manifestations of poverty throughout the country. The World Bank estimates that less than half of the population in the Belize has access to sanitation facilities (47%). Water sanitation although not emphasized in the structural adjustment prescription, the government of Belize has initiated and mobilized support for constructing water and sanitation systems in rural areas. Health care facilities have been established in each of the six districts in Belize, and in April of 2001 the National Health Insurance scheme was established to enable all Belizeans to have access to quality and affordable health care (Garcia, 2005).

Embedded within the Belizean case study are social, cultural and political issues of class, power, and entitlement. The relevance of these issues becomes evident as one begins to assess the ability of neo-liberal policy to combat poverty. Despite periods of rapid macroeconomic growth from 1996 to 2002, poverty assessments conducted in those years indicate no change in the levels of poverty. The structural adjustment approach, although well intentioned, was misaligned with the complexity of the Belizean context and as a result rendered inept at addressing poverty.

In the case of Belize, the political administration's position was one that was caught in the middle of the neo-liberal prescription for macroeconomic growth on one side and the public outcry for a response to distinct contextual factors that rendered one out of three people in the population to a life of poverty on the other. The cognitive dissonance that resulted came to characterize response of the Belizean government to structural adjustment. In alignment with the IMF's neo-liberal ideology, and in an effort to curb public external debt, by 2000, the government of Belize had actively begun expand free trade options (with some import restrictions) and privatize public services (IMF, 2000)

From 1995 to 2007 disagreement between the political administration and the IMF existed in regard to the use of funds gained through privatization and commercial loans to support the burgeoning public debt. While the IMF warned against public spending on housing, jobs, health care and social security, it could be argued that public opinion demanded such a response from the government as a means to address problems associated with poverty. Not until 2007 when the threat of devaluation was increasingly imminent did authorities firmly move to implement the IMF's recommendations for fiscal reform. This recent turn of events may indicate a critical point of alignment between the IMF prescription, the political will of Belizean authorities, and the public for fiscal reform. The tenuousness of this point will depend upon the ability of each entity to demonstrate flexibility and agility in their willingness balance movement toward macroeconomic growth while confronting the poverty problem.

## **IV. RECOMMENDATIONS**

The adoption of a strategy that bridges the gap between economic and human development approaches to poverty alleviation is suggested as an alternative to the standard neo-liberal approach. This strategy would go beyond calculating needs and progress based upon economic indicators to include a focus on the non-income based capacity of individuals, communities, countries or regions to eradicate poverty. This comprehensive economic and human development strategy to poverty alleviation could enable political authorities and IMF advisors to adeptly progress toward macroeconomic development while meeting the demand for public accountability. This recommended strategy would also require increased flexibility of the IMF prescription to address non-economic based issues in the local context.

Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum ignited an international trend toward assessing non-economic based assets and capabilities to alleviate poverty (Grusky and Kanbur, 2002). Their strategy involved capturing such indicators as access to technology, water, sanitation, education, employment, and health care; social, political, and economic inclusion; and human capital development. These non-monetary indicators of poverty allow for the complexities of the contextual nature of poverty to be assessed. Although time consuming and limited in the ability to attribute meaning and compare findings across cultures, regions and nations, this approach particularly when applied over time may provide the most accurate gauge of the nature of poverty within a given population.

The adoption of Sen and Nussbaum's approach is recommended as a means to enable increased flexibility in the IMF prescription. The reduced reliance on economic measures of progress and increased use of context-specific indicators of poverty should also include measures of crime, type and degree of labor force participation for women, unemployment, and access to affordable housing in the case of Belize. Persons living with HIV/AIDS represent 2.6% of the population, and rates of infection are rising most rapidly among young women age 14 – 24; as a result increased political attention to the relationship between incidents of child sexual exploitation in exchange for financial assistance, HIV/AIDS, and poverty is also suggested to help inform the investment of national and international resources toward the development of a comprehensive national poverty reduction strategy.

Ongoing assessments should emphasize measures of inclusion. In addition to improving access to technology, the ability of individuals to effectively exercise their voices in social, economic and political affairs can contribute to the collective capacity of groups, communities, and nations to meet their basic needs. Together with traditional economic-based measures, the indicators listed above can provide organizations interested in supporting economic growth in developing countries with a comprehensive view of the types of interventions or strategies needed to also move individuals out of poverty.

In addition to modifying the measures of progress, strategies and interventions developed to boost the economy and eradicate poverty should be grounded in sound and sustainable social policy. Innovative reforms should include the possibilities for asset redistribution through low income cooperative housing and enterprise development initiatives and provide the means for men and women to access credit and build their capacity for wealth attainment (Heintz and Jardine, 1998). Traditional social reforms should be coupled with macroeconomic policy that seeks to achieve the creation of and access to liveable wage paying employment and training designed to meet needs in high demand markets and improve access to services that meet basic needs such as education, sanitation, health care and housing. These reforms need not be solely government driven, but should include the collective participation of the private sector, media, and civil society.

While the goal of macroeconomic growth has been sustained over the past decade, ironically neither Belizean authorities nor the IMF have successfully addressed poverty. Along with persistent poverty, this period was notably characterized by disproportionate levels of male and female labor force participation and unemployment, with women experiencing significantly higher levels of women remaining out of the labor market or facing unemployment than men. Globalization, in the form of neo-liberal capitalism has contributed to heightened inequality within and between nation states and has served to further marginalize vulnerable populations across the globe, especially among women, particularly women of color (Adeleye-Fayemi, 2000; Dominelli, 2002; Johnson, 2001; Sewpaul, 2005b). Further research should explore the affect of women's levels of labor force participation and unemployment on macroeconomic development and poverty.

Non-traditional social reforms and legislation should also be established that facilitate the transformation of gender ideologies and relationships in the public and private spheres that reconceptualizes gender roles within the household and workplace. To reverse the trend of persistent poverty for women, training and education particularly for occupations where women have been historically underrepresented, childcare support, enforced anti-employment discrimination and anti-domestic violence legislation, and programs that enhance women's access to credit and home and business ownership opportunities are needed. The possibility exists that to effectively address the neo-liberal ideals of economic growth and poverty reduction for developing nations requires their demonstrable commitment to work in partnership with international interests to develop policy and programs that target women's labor force participation particularly in educational and occupational areas where women have been traditionally underrepresented.

Belize presents a unique case study in regard to neo-liberal economic policy and poverty eradication. Evidence shows significant economic growth was experienced in Belize during the 1990s, yet this growth did not lead to a corresponding reduction in the level of poverty. This study suggests an integrated approach toward poverty elimination is needed that rests upon the ability of public and private sector representatives to adopt a shared vision for change and identify priority areas for collaboration that foster economic growth as well as non-monetary yet culturally significant measures of progress. The failure of organizations to develop a shared vision for change and create policy that responds to the contextual nature of poverty at the onset of establishing relationships with developing countries aids in sustaining the illusion or perception that "one solution fits all" approaches to structural adjustment can effectively boost the economy while supporting those most vulnerable.

While this analysis centres upon the neo-liberal approach to poverty eradication in the Belizean context, the implications derived from the assessment transcend national and regional boundaries. An anecdotal perspective that views neo-liberalism in the Belizean context as a local anomaly would miss the opportunity to observe and understand the ways in which local events may come to have global consequences. A primary recommendation of emerging from this paper is to argue that the lens for assessing poverty eradication in the era of globalization and neo-liberalism be multifaceted, such that it can at once magnify the impact of distant events on the local experience as well as the global consequences of local developments (Held, 1999). Suggested is the use of an integrated analytical framework that advances an understanding of the universal and the particular as a means to articulate and facilitate the flow of social and economic capital within and between local, regional and global contexts.

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