



PHOTO ILLUSTRATION: DAVID RIDLEY

**WINTER'S HERE** Cold weather means hard times for the poor, but getting them off the streets will take more than money

# There's more to the poverty problem than dollars and cents



GRAHAM LETTNER

“Trying to understand poverty purely in economic terms would be like trying to understand food only by its nutritional value. All the tastes, textures, colours, smells, dinner parties, and ice-cream binges would be lost, and you'd be left with nothing but caloric content and recommended daily intake.”

The developed world is stuck on the idea that poverty is an economic problem. This demonstrates a fundamental misunderstanding of poverty, and is the reason why the aid efforts of the developed world thus far have so often been ineffective.

Poverty certainly encompasses economics, but that's not where it ends. Poverty also involves social attitudes, international power relations, cultural history, physical geography, and personal interactions. Poverty is messy and hard to quantify, and conceptualizing it in a strict economic sense is severely limiting.

When you encounter poverty, it's rarely on economic terms—usually, it's much more visceral. Here in Edmonton, poverty commonly looks aboriginal, feels like stinging January cold, and sounds empty and lonely. It elicits a gut reaction of unease and helplessness, neither of which is expressed well in the language of economics.

Poverty is far more complex than what economics alone can describe. Trying to understand poverty purely in economic terms would be like trying to understand food only by its

nutritional value. All the tastes, textures, colours, smells, dinner parties, and ice-cream binges would be lost, and you'd be left with nothing but caloric content and recommended daily intake.

We need as many different ways as possible of thinking about poverty. This could be achieved through stories, physical geography and human history, or the use of song or the visual arts—we can't rely exclusively on economists to give us a complete understanding of such a complex issue.

International aid would be more effective with a better and broader understanding of poverty. It would enable the developed world to work more effectively in the messy and chaotic field of human development. Business plans are often too rigid and concerned exclusively with monetary aspects to allow for any real change or development to take place in human terms. People are often disorganized, indecisive, and unpredictable. Aid efforts would do better if they could grasp these realities, rather than assuming them away as part of an abstract economic model.

Operating in purely economic terms restricts human capability and creativity. These are essential elements in fostering lasting social change. Constrained to acting only in such a prescribed manner, people likely won't have the means to create meaningful change to situations of poverty.

This is not idealistic woolgathering, but rather the only way to create lasting positive change with an issue as challenging as poverty. The American civil rights movement was an incredible example of creating this kind of change. With no detailed business case or formal organization, but only limited month-to-month planning, sparse and unpredictable funding, and decentralized leadership, this movement overturned entrenched economic, political, and social injustices.

Operating solely in the realm of economics isolates the developed from the developing world. Armchair macroeconomics keeps the developed world safe from being emotionally vulnerable to the reality of poverty and personally responsible for the well-being of the poor. A new understanding of poverty in more humane terms could bridge this gap.

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