

PART I

Chapter 4

## How do we get to zero on poverty – and stay there?

by

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Nearly half a billion people around the world are chronically poor. Chronically poor people are trapped in extreme poverty, which persists for many years and even across generations. Policy makers who really want to eliminate poverty for good need to design policies that not only get people out of poverty and vulnerability, but that also stop people slipping back into poverty, and that address the causes of chronic poverty. This includes paying serious attention to the large share of chronically poor who live in fragile states. Governments wishing to end chronic poverty need to offer social protection policies that provide an income floor for the chronically poor – as for example employment guarantees, social assistance schemes, conditional cash transfers, pensions, child and disability allowances, etc. They also need to undergo a root-and-branch re-orientation and reprioritisation of policies and programmes – especially in agriculture, education, energy and employment. And they need to clearly distinguish among policies to prevent impoverishment, help people escape poverty and address the root causes of poverty. Establishing a target for each of these trajectories would help to improve the quality of policies. What would such targets look like?

- Target 1: Increase and sustain escapes from poverty until extreme poverty is all but eliminated.
- Target 2: Reduce impoverishment to zero.
- Target 3: Reform institutions and eliminate social (including gender) discrimination, norms and inequalities that keep people poor.

*There are at the very least half a billion chronically poor people in the world*

The post-2015 development framework will in all likelihood aspire to complete the job which the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) began – eradicating extreme poverty and deprivation. Whether the new framework helps to make that noble objective possible will depend on how many “distractions” it contains and how the poverty eradication goal is framed. In most countries, getting to zero (or eradicating extreme poverty and deprivation) will mean tackling chronic poverty (Box 4.1) as well as less persistent poverty.<sup>2</sup>

#### Box 4.1. Who are the chronically poor?

Chronic poverty is defined here as extreme poverty experienced over many years, a lifetime, or perpetuated from generation to generation. In practice, this may be translated as poverty experienced at two distinct points in time, separated by several years (Hulme and Shepherd, 2003). Severe poverty (people living significantly below the extreme poverty line) can be used as a proxy when measuring chronic poverty – this is necessary since the panel data which allow analysis of poverty over time are not available for more than a few countries. Severe poverty is usually less widely experienced than chronic poverty, but most severely poor people are also chronically poor (McKay and Perge, 2011).

Chronic poverty is often multidimensional. In other words, people who suffer from chronic poverty are poor not only in monetary terms, but also in many other dimensions – though the degree and nature of multidimensionality vary significantly from country to country (Apablaza and Yalonetzky, 2012; CPRC, 2004; Chapter 3).

The 2008-09 *Chronic Poverty Report* estimated (conservatively) that there were some 320-443 million – almost half a billion – chronically poor people in the world based on an income/consumption measure (CPRC, 2008). These figures have been challenged as being too low (Nandy, 2008). It is possible that many more people are affected by severe multidimensional – and therefore persistent – deprivation, or by deep exclusion, discrimination, vulnerability and lack of assets. It can be expected that the proportion of the poor who are just under the poverty line – and who therefore can escape relatively easily from poverty, at least for a time – will decrease as the remaining poverty gets harder to address (Chandy et al., 2013).

Chronic poverty is mainly found in South Asia and sub-Saharan Africa, mainly in low-income and lower-middle-income countries. While the numbers are higher in South Asia, the depth of poverty is greater in sub-Saharan Africa.

If the factors keeping people poor over long periods of time (or in chronic poverty) are not explicitly addressed, there is no chance of getting to or near zero. Addressing chronic poverty is part of tackling poverty as a whole, but it must be approached differently. It

requires understanding how poverty dynamics work and how poverty is transferred between generations. Studies of poverty dynamics provide information about how and why people become poor, remain poor, or escape poverty (Baulch, 2012). People may escape poverty or fall into poverty either temporarily or permanently. In this chapter, I describe how public policies that assist permanent escape, prevent permanent and new impoverishment, and address the factors leading to chronic poverty should be at the centre of the post-2015 framework. Otherwise there is no scope to get to zero.

## The roots of chronic poverty are usually political and institutional

*We have the knowledge to tackle chronic poverty;  
it is political courage that is lacking*

People are not poor over long periods without good reason, nor do they want to remain that way. Sometimes the environment – the economy, society, politics (and more rarely, the physical environment) – is simply not conducive to escaping from poverty. This is the case, for example, in situations of political instability (Chapter 16, Global approach 4), or where there is low GDP per capita and slow economic growth. Sometimes the poorest face deep structural barriers to overcoming their deprivation, with discrimination in the labour market or the education system leading to social and political exclusion. Sometimes the poor face challenging deficits in capabilities, such as education and skills, or in nutrition or health (Sen, 1999), with little scope to address them.

There is, almost certainly, enough knowledge available now to seriously tackle chronic poverty and modify poverty dynamics in many societies; knowledge is rarely the constraint. To make this happen, however, policy makers must be prepared to borrow ideas and experience from other societies, and to take some risks on behalf of the poorest. There is, nonetheless, in any society “a framework of permissible thought” (Bird et al., 2004), which restricts the easy discussion of certain ideas in public. This, in turn, limits the ideas that political leaders are free or willing to explore. Researchers, journalists and activists have an important job to do by challenging these frameworks so that currently “unthinkable” courses of public and private action capable of addressing chronic poverty can be openly debated. So for example, it may be “unthinkable” for policy makers in a particular country to provide a social protection “floor” for consumption because this is held to generate dependency and to be unaffordable. The evidence from countries in the South shows that neither of these are true (Chapters 6 and 7). Politics – and the ways in which institutions work – are usually at the heart of the problem of chronic poverty. Yet because the chronically poor rarely organise themselves to put pressure on politicians or the political system, there is often little political motivation for change. In low and lower-middle-income countries, there may also be limited resources with which to pursue redistributive strategies, although politics are usually a more serious obstacle. Prolonged and increasingly global economic depression will not help this situation, but the political space for progressive policies is determined less by levels of economic growth than by the nature of political regimes in power. In fragile states, developing an inclusive political settlement that provides a basis for social cohesion and long-term growth and prosperity can be especially challenging (Chapter 16, Global approach 4).

## Policies should provide a permanent way out of poverty

*Unless policies allow people to escape poverty for good, we will only fleetingly get to zero*

It can be argued that chronic poverty is just like poverty only more so – in which case simply doing more of the same – “business-as-usual” policies – should get us to zero. “Business as usual” in this context means the three legs of poverty reduction outlined in the World Bank’s 1990 *World Development Report*: 1) macro-economic policies that prevent inflation and generate economic growth; 2) policies that address basic human development (health, water and sanitation, education); and 3) social protection. To this trilogy, the 2000 *World Development Report* added “empowerment”, admitting that social relations and politics were important determinants of poverty reduction – and that empowerment is especially important for the chronically poor, who tend to be relatively powerless (Chapter 16, Global approach 5; and World Bank, 2000).

Today, however, the social protection and empowerment dimensions of this agenda have only been fully addressed in the policies of a few countries (Shepherd and Scott, 2011; Chapter 6). Not only do many governments fail to actively work to empower their people; they may, in fact, do the opposite. Eradicating poverty will definitely entail raising the levels of power held by the poorest people – in terms of bargaining power in labour and commodity markets, power in the household and community, and power to get their issues addressed by politicians. Some countries still do not accept the need for systemic, state-provided social protection. And some, even middle-income countries, have not invested much of their income in public education or health. So even these well-established agendas are by no means fully implemented, and there is plenty of scope for improving business as usual.

Even if we were to redouble business-as-usual efforts, it would not suffice to eradicate chronic poverty. So what else will it take? What is needed is a root-and-branch re-orientation and re-prioritisation of policies and programmes. Tackling chronic poverty requires leadership and committed policies under four headings: social protection, growth that reaches the poorest, human development for the hard to reach, and transformative social change. The Chronic Poverty Advisory Network has begun to produce a series of policy guides for doing this, sector by sector, topic by topic, and for different categories of countries (e.g. see Hossain et al., 2012; Lenhardt et al., 2012; Scott et al., 2013). Some of the key points are outlined here.

### **Solid social protection**

Systems of social protection, backed by national political commitment, are essential (Chapter 6). This means strong investment in the kind of social protection that provides a minimum income as part of a standing political settlement, rather than a temporary safety net for the vulnerable (Barrientos and Nuno-Zarazua, 2011). Well-targeted social assistance schemes can work well: examples include numerous cases of conditional cash transfers in Latin America (see Box 6.1 in Chapter 6 for an example in Mexico) and combined pensions, child and disability allowances in southern Africa (also in Chapter 6). What does not work is the pilot-programme approach being tried with donor funding in so many of their partner countries. Why? At best, such projects and programmes can only prepare the ground. Systems, on the other hand, provide vulnerable people with the knowledge that there will be a social floor this year, next year and in the future. This reassurance allows

vulnerable people to make greater investments in their children's education, health and nutrition, and in productive assets.

### **Better quality employment**

There are groups of people in many societies – agricultural, construction and domestic workers, for instance, and internal migrants – who experience persistently low wages and unhealthy or even “unfree” working conditions, where they are tied to a particular employer or labour contractor to pay off a debt (see Phillips, 2011). Casual and other forms of wage labour – increasingly supplied by labour contractors – are often effectively excluded from labour legislation. Many economists and ministries of finance are unwilling to promote the formalisation of such informal employment – which is often insecure and exploitative – because they fear this will undermine job creation. The result is that the worst forms of wage labour are not avenues out of poverty, but simply survival options. At best, they can help a household escape poverty, but only when combined with other economic activities in a “portfolio”.

If employment is to play a more positive role in improving the lot of chronically poor households, job quality needs to get on the policy agenda. And while legislation can set the tone for a society, recognising the importance of informal professions and providing the basis for trade union collective bargaining approaches, it may not have a significant impact on wage levels or working conditions. This can be the role for employment guarantees that extend social protection to the informal economy, by guaranteeing a minimum of work to people who would otherwise struggle to find enough. India's Mahatma Gandhi Rural Employment Guarantee Act and Scheme is the premier example; Ethiopia's Productive Safety Nets Programme is an example of a temporary but large-scale programme from which the country is learning how to establish a permanent system. However, these are the only two functioning systems. The greater participation of foreign direct investment in an economy and the international consumer pressure and media scrutiny that comes with such investment could also be a powerful force for improvements in job quality (Scott et al., forthcoming). If such consumer pressure were to be exercised by Southern consumers, this would be an even more powerful force for change.

### **Productive assets**

Rather than (or at least as well as) obsessing about crop productivity, there are other areas on which agriculture ministries and agencies could focus to help poor farm households build the asset bases – additional land, livestock and equipment – they need to escape poverty permanently. For example, improving market functioning would allow greater returns and add value by increasing competition, or improving regulation or how value chains operate. Introducing agricultural labour into the agriculture policy agenda would ensure that the growing numbers of landless households that gain all or most of their incomes from wage labour get the best deal they can (Lenhardt et al., 2012). Much can also be gained by helping landless households to get hold of non-land assets, such as livestock, or farm equipment which they can rent to farmers, enabling them to participate in the agricultural market economy in a self-employed capacity, not only as labourers.

### **Productive energy**

Chronically poor people are less likely to have access to electricity than others, and more likely to depend on biomass for cooking and other energy requirements. Access to electricity

often goes hand in hand with escaping from poverty. It can provide the basis for non-farm and more productive employment, allow children from poor households to perform better in school because they can do more homework, and has a variety of other benefits. Providing a light bulb or two will not change many lives for the better, however. Enabling chronically poor households to be part of the energy revolution will involve reducing the upfront costs of connection to the grid by allowing the poorest to pay the initial connection charges over long periods, or be cross-subsidised by wealthier customers. Other essential steps include extending the grid; or investing widely in off-grid decentralised and environmentally sustainable power. At the same time, energy providers need to work with other development agencies to enable the poorest households to acquire the equipment they need to render access to energy productive, thereby reducing drudgery (Scott et al., 2013).

### **Education for longer**

Development efforts have focused on getting enrolment rates up in primary education, but it is when children can complete primary schooling and continue into post-primary education (secondary school, technical/vocational training) that it makes the difference for chronically poor households. Education is “portable capital”, critical for successful migration and participation in the labour and other markets (Bird et al., 2010). The education agenda needs to focus on post-primary education and its links to the labour market (Hossain et al., 2012). Governments also need to expand pre-school arrangements, especially for children from poor households, because there is abundant evidence that this assists poor children’s performance at school. They also need to increase the effective demand for education and address the barriers faced by the poorest households (by improving its quality, and by providing cash transfers, school meals and scholarships).

There are additional important areas of policy that will require revision or strengthening: for example, policies on health; in the legal sector; policies on marriage, inheritance and gender equality (Chapter 16, Global approach 1); policies on the social economy, internally displaced people and refugees. The Chronic Poverty Advisory Network is committed to providing policy guidance on all such issues.

### **Far-sighted political leadership**

There are 107 middle-income countries (MICs) in the world today – and as we have seen in Chapter 1, these countries are home to a large proportion of today’s extremely poor. Upper MICs have the resources to invest in the chronically poor – and many now have political regimes that are determined to do so. There are three major models followed by such regimes: the Latin American social-democratic redistributionist model (Brazil, Ecuador and possibly Nicaragua can be grouped here); the East Asian elite-led growth and education model (the People’s Republic of China, Korea, Chinese Taipei and Viet Nam); and a populist “third way”, combining elements of both (Cape Verde since 1991, Thailand in the 2000s, Tunisia pre-Arab Spring). The first two models require heavy political pre-conditions (movement-based socialist or communist parties or a history of authoritarian anti-communist politics), but can be very effective in addressing chronic poverty. Yet most countries will probably have to go down the third route.

In all these models, far-sighted political leadership with a strong nation-building plan are critical. Economic growth can be the Achilles heel of the redistributionist model. In the elite-led growth and education model, investments in health services and social protection have typically come late – in response to crisis, violence or the threat of it – rather than

being built in from the beginning. In all three models, however, social and economic structural transformations have been fundamental in addressing chronic poverty. Lower-middle-income and low-income countries need to debate and decide which route they will go down; the upper-middle-income countries, which have had limited success in addressing chronic poverty, would also do well to learn from others' success.

## The post-2015 framework should have chronic poverty at its heart

*Specific targets could put chronic poverty and vulnerability at the core of the post-2015 framework*

There is some concern that the enthusiasm for a global public goods approach (Chapter 13) could result in a “Christmas tree” of goals and targets in the post-2015 framework, many of which may not be closely related to eradicating extreme poverty and deprivation. Such an approach could divert attention from some of the core issues mentioned above. The post-2015 framework needs to focus on goals and targets that will very directly help to achieve poverty eradication as the overriding goal, rather than struggling to construct a single framework for developmental and environmental issues; in such a monolithic framework, poverty eradication could get lost. On the other hand, a poverty-focused framework can – of course – include global public goods<sup>3</sup> where relevant.

### **Equality as a goal**

It would be extremely helpful to have a goal of reducing income inequality (Chapter 1) or at least a set of indicators of inequality across the various goals. This would draw attention to the fortunes of the poorest people. The Gini Index is the best known and most popular measure of income inequality, but does not particularly draw attention to progress for the poorest (Cobham and Sumner, 2013). The Palma Index is an improvement, by focusing on the position of the poorest 40% compared to the richest 10%. In many societies, however, the people who are ranked in the bottom 40% include many more than those considered to be in extreme poverty, and this will increasingly be the case beyond 2015. This is why the Chronic Poverty Advisory Network is proposing a “median measure” of inequality, which would compare the bottom 5%, 10% and 20% with the middle of the distribution (Lenhardt and Shepherd, 2013). The advantage of this measure is that it would enable a policy maker to set a realistic objective of bringing the poorest up towards the median level (and not just for income: it can also be used for health, education, etc.). This makes the comparison much more policy-relevant than the Gini or the Palma. Such objectives can be achieved within 15 or 20 years.

Getting widespread commitment to ending inequality will, however, be a huge political challenge. The UN's consultation on inequalities<sup>4</sup> is laying the intellectual groundwork, but significant international and national political groundwork will also be needed if enough countries are to get to grips with inequality. A strong Inequalities Alliance, bringing together countries that are active in containing inequality and entities that are working to tackle the issue (non-governmental organisations [NGOs], UN agencies), could help motivate other countries and development communities to take inequality on board more fully.

### **An assortment of poverty lines**

The world has been very focused on a USD 1.25 per day definition of extreme poverty, but it also needs to focus attention on what happens above as well as below that level. Whatever the merits of this poverty line methodologically (Chapter 2; and Anand et al., 2010), if the post-2015 framework is concerned with getting people out of poverty permanently, and avoiding re-impoveryishment, it needs to focus on USD 2 and USD 4 per day levels of income as well. Otherwise, there is the risk that once a household escapes USD 1.25 per day poverty it enters a policy no-man's land. For example, the rationale for providing social protection has been to bring the poorest people nearer to crossing the poverty line. Once people cross the poverty line, their entitlements to such services may cease. On the other hand, economically focused programmes – such as micro-finance and value-chain development – have largely benefited those above the poverty line. The people most vulnerable to exploitation and unfree labour may not only be in the extreme poverty bracket, and therefore could be missed by poverty-reduction strategies and social protection aimed at the USD 1.25 per day poor, making them more vulnerable to exploitation. Only eight upper-middle-income countries – Brazil, Chile, Costa Rica, Dominican Republic, Iran, Jordan, Thailand and Tunisia – have reduced USD 1.25 and USD 2 per day poverty at the same time.

### **Targets for getting to, and staying at, zero**

Policy makers who *really* want to eliminate poverty for good need not only to design policies that get people out of poverty and vulnerability, but also those that stop people slipping into poverty, and those that address the causes of chronic poverty. However the policies for each of these are not necessarily the same. There is a huge amount of mobility around poverty lines: statements such as “31% of people are extremely poor” can be due to many different combinations of chronic poverty, escaping poverty and impoverishment. Although it is now possible to measure this mobility in a few countries, better policy making requires that governments and other stakeholders have much better information about – and causal analysis of – these poverty dynamics.

Establishing a target for each of these policy goals would not only help to improve the quality of policies; it would also generate a long overdue demand for new investment in the longitudinal household survey data necessary to track the progress households make over time. Box 4.2 provides an idea of what the new poverty dynamics goal and targets could look like. While this schema needs further elaboration and assessment, it suggests a new approach that puts chronic poverty and vulnerability at the core of the framework. This is essential as the numbers of households just under the extreme poverty line will diminish as time goes on, making it harder to get people over the poverty line (Chandy et al., 2013).

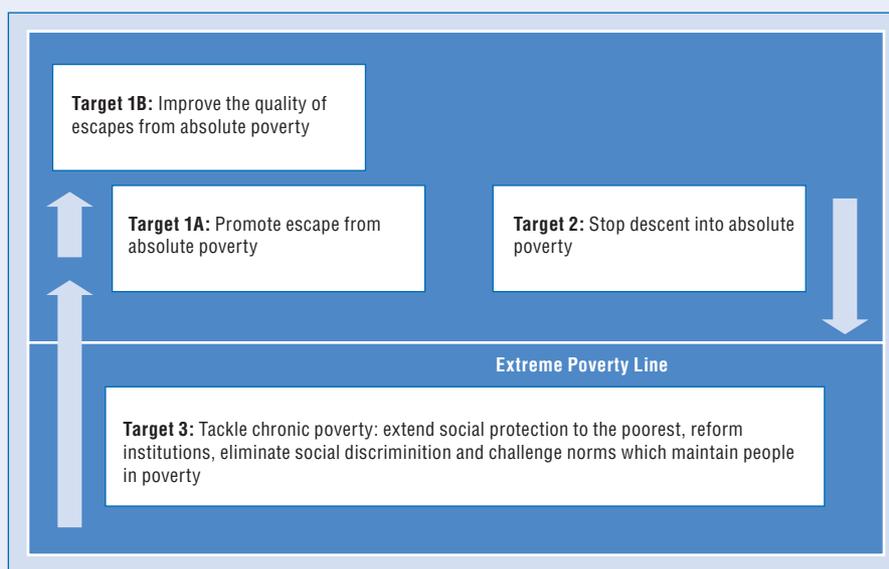
The exciting thing about adopting such goals and targets in the new framework is that it means looking at policy and data in a new and much more sophisticated, but feasible, way. This dynamic perspective could also be applied to other dimensions of deprivation in the post-2015 framework for which thresholds can be established (as described in Chapter 3). For example, in education, the thresholds could be completion of primary education, or completion of nine or ten years of education.

In order to monitor the achievement of these targets, panel surveys in all countries could measure progress in a number of these different dimensions over time. From this one could also construct a Multidimensional Poverty Index if required. Countries would need to establish a baseline against which to track poverty dynamics, and could also track households escaping multi-dimensional poverty or entering it, if desired. They can do so by

**Box 4.2. A poverty eradication goal expressed as new poverty dynamics targets**

- Target 1: Increase and sustain escapes from income poverty until extreme poverty is all but eliminated (countries to set own targets to reach zero by 2030).
- Target 2: Reduce impoverishment (people becoming poor) to zero (this implies protection against economic, climatic and other environmental shocks as well as idiosyncratic shocks and stresses which can impoverish people).
- Target 3: Reform institutions, eliminate discrimination (including based on gender) and other social norms and intersecting inequalities that keep people poor. This target will require countries to develop their own specific reforms.

**Figure 4.1. A dynamic post-2015 goal: Eradicate extreme poverty**



Note: Target 1 should be combined with Target 2 for each country, since some countries need to do more of 1 and less of 2, and vice versa.

developing a panel in or around 2015 to track households originally surveyed up to ten years previously<sup>5</sup> (given the global recession the choice of base year will be critical). They will then need to commit to regular surveys to monitor trends in poverty dynamics. The World Bank's Living Standards Measurement Surveys<sup>6</sup> could be adapted to this end. These changes in data collection are financially achievable: bringing a country up to speed with a panel data baseline, or any other major survey, by around 2015 might cost USD 200 000 on average, depending on the size of the country; for all developing countries the total would be well under USD 100 million.

**Redress global inequities, strengthen local voices**

Clearly, such targets are more ambitious for many of the sub-Saharan African countries than they are for some others. An element of global income redistribution (see Box 4.3) as well as national policy development and socio-economic transformation will be required to speed up current progress. The level of development assistance needed by each country

**Box 4.3. The rich must consume less, and the poor more**

Chronic poverty brings the issue of sustainability right to the top of the agenda, since there are clearly planetary boundaries at stake. It is critical that rich countries and people reduce their consumption to make room for the growing numbers of poor people, and that poor countries increase theirs, in a process of consumption convergence. The discussion about reducing consumption in rich countries, and increasingly among elites and upper middle classes in emerging countries, is an aspect of the debate about inequality which is still to be properly aired among global and national leaders.

The effort to cross-fertilise the post-2015 framework with sustainable development goals is an excellent aspiration (Chapter 11). Unfortunately, until the leaders and political classes of rich and emerging economies can persuade their populations to begin to reduce consumption, making the necessary investments in green growth\* (OECD, 2011), reduced energy consumption, and alternative/greener forms of manufacturing, construction, energy and food production, this will remain merely an aspiration.

\* Green growth means fostering economic growth and development, while ensuring that natural assets continue to provide the resources and environmental services on which our well-being relies. It focuses on the synergies and trade-offs between the environmental and economic pillars of sustainable development.

can be gauged based on how much additional effort will be required to accelerate current trends. Changes in international policies on economic vulnerability, such as insuring against trade shocks and on climate change, will also be required as these do not currently protect the poorest countries.

Furthermore, a post-2015 agreement cannot provide a guide to what to do in each and every country, how best to combine and sequence policies, or how to address context-specific issues that keep people poor: discrimination, exclusion, social norms, etc. To transform these and other critical aspects of social, economic and political relationships, progressive political movements and solid relationships between state and civil society will be critical. Civil society organisations need to be able to press governments on difficult issues, run public campaigns and work at the grassroots to change impoverishing social norms and practices. These organisations also have a crucial role to play, as do local governments, in experimenting with new approaches.

## Conclusions

Tackling chronic poverty means not only providing the social protection that brings the poorest up near the poverty line, but also moving beyond social protection to a root-and-branch re-appraisal of how each sector can contribute. Indiscriminate economic growth, human development, empowerment and social protection will not be enough: economic growth needs to benefit the poorest; the hardest to reach need to be included in human development progress; empowerment strategies need to address the systematic discrimination and exclusion that in certain situations keep people poor over long periods of time; and social protection needs to be systemic. Evidence from middle-income countries that have successfully tackled chronic poverty suggests that social and economic structural transformation is helpful, but still not the whole story.

Addressing poverty in fragile states is a key to getting to zero. Here, as elsewhere, primacy must be given to national-level action. Politics are critical – and democracy is not the only route, although it is generally helpful in the long term. The post-2015 framework

cannot impose political settlements, but it can suggest the reduction of vulnerability, the inclusion of the most marginalised, and the achievement of greater equality – including for poor and vulnerable women. All of these are necessary to eradicate poverty, but are also fundamental building blocks for sustained peace, social cohesion and economic growth. The new framework can also provide benchmarks to be achieved in these areas.

## Notes

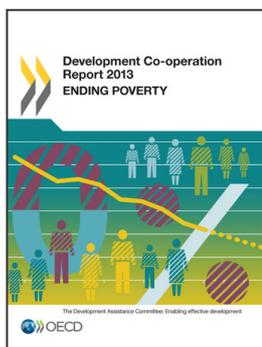
1. Thanks to Amanda Lenhardt, Amdissa Teshome, Bob Baulch, Felix Tete, Karori Singh, Lucia Dacorta, Lucy Scott, Nicola Phillips, Prakash Karn and Tim Mahoney for comments on the draft of this chapter. The responsibility is of course entirely mine.
2. Even if “zero” is defined as not quite zero – for example, the World Bank is proposing it should be defined as 3% of the population in the case of income poverty (Kim, 2013; Ravallion, 2012).
3. Global public goods are qualities that potentially affect anyone, anywhere, such as a stable climate, or freedom from infectious disease.
4. This joint civil society/UN consultation, co-led by UNICEF and UN Women with support from the governments of Denmark and Ghana, is an open and inclusive conversation for civil society, academia, governments and the UN to discuss what the post-2015 development agenda should look like. See [www.worldwewant2015.org/inequalities](http://www.worldwewant2015.org/inequalities).
5. A new survey in 2015 would at least partly select its sample from a previous survey, to create an instant “panel” of households surveyed across two points in time, from which measures of rates of escape, impoverishment and chronic poverty could be derived.
6. See <http://go.worldbank.org/IPLXWMCNJ0>.

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