



Research on Poverty Reduction and Livelihoods for the Poor: Theoretical Approaches

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ABSTRACT

Poverty reduction plays an important role in the socio-economic development strategy of countries around the world. The article provides an overview of the theoretical approaches to poverty reduction and livelihoods for the poor globally today. The first part introduces the concept of poverty in the world. The second part will present in detail the theoretical approaches to poverty and livelihoods for the poor worldwide. The research results provide in-depth understanding of the concept of poverty in the world, theoretical approaches to poverty and livelihoods for the poor globally, contributing to a comprehensive understanding of poverty research methods and towards providing information for governments and policymakers to build a theoretical framework for sustainable poverty reduction for the country.

INTRODUCTION

“Poverty reduction is a critical priority for nations worldwide, playing a pivotal role in socio-economic development strategies” (Center for Disaster Philanthropy, 2020). Despite concerted global efforts, poverty persists as a pervasive challenge, afflicting billions and impeding their ability “to effectively participate in society” due to inadequate access to essential needs like food, housing, healthcare, education, and employment. Accurately conceptualizing poverty and developing effective theoretical frameworks to guide interventions is therefore imperative.

Researchers have proposed various theories to elucidate the complex dynamics underpinning poverty. Lewis (1955) postulated a “vicious cycle of poverty” wherein socioeconomic factors like low income, limited access to basic needs, hunger, health issues, lack of employment opportunities, and economic decline reinforce each other, perpetuating deprivation (Eskelinen, 2011). Building on this, Samuelson advanced the “vicious circle” theory, arguing that scarcities in human resources, natural resources, capital, and technology inhibit economic growth in developing nations, necessitating a government-driven “big push” through financial support, technology investment, land reform, and education to boost productivity and incomes (Freeman, 2011).

Conversely, Coleman’s (1980s-1990s) rational choice theory positioned poverty as arising from individuals’ constrained choices to optimize limited resources, suggesting improving their socioeconomic environment and available choices (Bowpitt, 2000). Meanwhile, Lewis (1959) viewed poverty as a self-perpetuating culture characterized by dependency, hopelessness, low aspirations, emphasis on luck over effort, loose family ties, and proclivity toward violence (Hennock, 1991).

These seminal theories have shaped discourse on poverty’s etiology and potential solutions. However, a synthesis explicating contemporary theoretical approaches encompassing evolving global realities is lacking. By bridging this gap, this research provides a comprehensive understanding of poverty conceptualization and theoretical frameworks globally. These insights can guide governments and policymakers in formulating sustainable, evidence-based poverty reduction strategies tailored to their national contexts.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Worldwide, the issue of poverty reduction has always been of particular concern to researchers and international organizations. Therefore, there have been many studies carried out to assess the effectiveness of poverty reduction programs in countries around the world. Some notable studies include:

A study by scholar Martina Björkman Nyqvist (2018) published in the *American Economic Journal* evaluated the effectiveness of conditional cash transfer programs for the poor in West Africa. The results showed that these programs had positive impacts on income and consumption of the poor. A study by scholar Rathin Roy et al. (2007) published in the *Asian Journal of Development* analyzed the effectiveness of conditional cash transfer programs in Andhra

Pradesh, India. The results showed that this program significantly reduced the poverty rate and improved child nutrition.

A study by the group of authors Business for Development (2019) evaluated the impact of poverty reduction programs in Africa. The results showed that interventions in finance, skills training, and value chain development were effective in improving income and living conditions of the poor. A study by Alkire et al. (2015) published in the Social Science Journal analyzed the multidimensional approach to measuring and reducing poverty. The results showed that the multidimensional approach helps identify poverty more accurately and propose appropriate solutions. The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) regularly publishes on poverty reduction policies, especially focusing on developing countries. UNDP also has projects to assist countries in achieving poverty reduction goals, including Vietnam.

A study by scholar Nguyen Thanh Binh et al. (2012) published in the Can Tho University Science Journal assessed the situation and impact of poverty reduction programs in Tra Vinh. The results showed that ineffective implementation of poverty reduction programs and lack of labor skills adversely affected the material life of the poor, especially the Khmer ethnic minorities. A study by scholar Nguyen Dinh Cung et al. (2018) published in the Vietnam Social Science Review analyzed the effectiveness of poverty reduction policies in Vietnam during 2002-2016. The research results showed that these policies contributed significantly to the poverty reduction program in Vietnam.

The doctoral dissertation *"Solutions for poverty reduction towards socio-economic development in the Northwest - Vietnam"* by author Nguyen Thi Nhung (2017) clarified the relationship between poverty reduction and socio-economic development, as well as the situation of implementing poverty reduction policies in the Northwest for ethnic minorities here. The results showed that poverty reduction policies have achieved positive results and contributed to socio-economic development in the Northwest. The master's thesis *"Implementation of poverty reduction policies in Quang Xuong district, Thanh Hoa province"* by author Hoang Thi Hang (2016) evaluated the strengths and weaknesses in implementing poverty reduction policies in the study area. From there, the study proposed a number of specific solution groups to implement poverty reduction policies for each group of poor households to improve their material life and spirit.

The master's thesis *"Sustainable poverty reduction policy for ethnic minorities in Phu Yen province"* by scholar Lam Vinh Ai (2017) assessed the factors affecting the implementation of poverty reduction policies for ethnic minorities in Phu Yen province. The results showed that the ineffective and "free" implementation of overlapping poverty reduction policies has made poverty reduction unsustainable, with the rate of returning to poverty rapidly occurring. Therefore, the study proposed some solutions to overcome this situation. The book *"Poverty Reduction Policy - Situation and Solutions"* by scholar Le Quoc Ly (2012) clarified some theoretical issues about poverty reduction and the guidelines and policies of the Party and State in implementing poverty reduction policies in the period 2001 - 2010. From there, it proposed some mechanisms to improve the effectiveness of poverty reduction policy implementation in Vietnam.

However, looking back at recent studies, there has been no research synthesizing theoretical approaches to poverty worldwide today. Therefore, the author realizes that research on this issue is extremely necessary to contribute to clarifying the theoretical approaches to poverty. The representative works listed above will be useful references to help the author a lot academically.

METHODOLOGY

This research employed a content analysis approach through secondary data analysis to examine theoretical approaches to poverty reduction and livelihoods for the poor globally. Content analysis is a systematic and objective means of describing and quantifying phenomena by analyzing various forms of recorded communication and documentation (Hatton & Bailey, 2000).

Secondary data analysis involves the use of existing data that was collected for purposes other than the current research study (Tripathy, 2013). It provides a viable and cost-effective means to re-analyze rich data sources and can lead to new interpretations and knowledge (Martin, 2008, pp. 34-36).

For this study, an extensive review and analysis of secondary sources was conducted, including published theoretical and empirical studies, academic journal articles, books, theses, reports from international organizations and development agencies focused on poverty reduction worldwide. Particular attention was given to seminal works and theories that have significantly shaped perspectives on poverty.

The data collected from these secondary sources underwent rigorous content analysis to extract key concepts, theoretical frameworks, definitions, causal models, and proposed solutions related to poverty and livelihoods. *“An inductive approach was used to allow the categorization and abstraction of themes to emerge directly from the data”* (Gillie, 2000). The analysis process involved open coding, creating categories and abstraction to identify overarching theoretical approaches.

This methodology enabled a systematic examination and synthesis of the breadth of theoretical perspectives on poverty reduction from global sources. The content analysis of authoritative secondary data provided an in-depth understanding of how poverty has been conceptualized and theorized by scholars and experts across disciplines over time. Potential limitations include perspectives that may have been missed from sources not included in the analysis.

RESEARCH RESULT

1. The Concept of Poverty Internationally

According to the United Nations (UN) definition: *“Poverty is a lack of the minimum capacity to effectively participate in society. Poverty means not having enough to eat, not having a place to live, not being able to see a doctor, not having land on which to grow food or not having a job to earn one’s living, not having access to credit”*. In addition, the World Bank (WB) has defined: *“Poverty is hunger, poverty is illness without being able to see a doctor, poverty is being without a job, it is fear for the future, living in utter destitution. Poverty is a lack of shelter, being sick and not being able to see*

a doctor, not being able to go to school and not knowing how to read. Poverty has many faces, changing from place to place, and over time, and has been described in many ways. Generally, poverty means the inability to attain a minimal standard of living". (Center for Disaster Philanthropy, 2020). Therefore, poverty is a global issue and the international community is constantly striving to address it. To better understand how poverty is determined worldwide, it is first necessary to understand that there are many different levels of poverty accepted globally. In general, the international community currently accepts 4 main levels of poverty, including: absolute poverty, relative poverty, non-financial poverty, secondary poverty.

Absolute Poverty: Often referred to by the international community as "extreme poverty", it identifies the condition where a person or multiple people are living in the most severe state of poverty. As of 2022, anyone living on less than \$2.15 a day is considered to be living in absolute poverty (World Bank, 2022). However, absolute poverty is not only characterized by money, but many people living in this level of poverty will also severely lack access to basic human needs. In 1995, the UN defined absolute poverty as follows: "A condition characterized by severe deprivation of basic human needs, including food, safe drinking water, sanitation facilities, health, shelter, education and information. It depends not only on income but also on access to services". Currently, around 9.2% of the world's population falls into absolute poverty, equivalent to 719 million people living on less than \$2.15 a day.

Relative Poverty: The international community believes that even though a person may earn more than \$2.15 a day, they are still living in poverty compared to their social situation. Relative poverty is a more common issue in middle and high-income countries, where although rates of absolute poverty are not common, segments of the population still have to live in hardship compared to the average person. Scholar Teppo Eskelinen has explained that: "*Relative poverty means poverty defined in relation to the position of others in the economy. Thus, a person may be relatively poor even when not absolutely poor, that is, able to meet her or his basic needs. Relative poverty can be observed by looking at the relative position in a society or internationally. Sometimes relative poverty is considered a most appropriate phenomenon in societies with no serious issues with absolute poverty, thus a less serious moral issue*". (Eskelinen, 2011). As such, the international community views relative poverty as an issue of failure in fair distribution, while absolute poverty is seen as a failure to meet basic human dignity requirements or even a failure to meet human rights. Therefore, both relative and absolute poverty relate to issues of global justice, but at two different levels.

Non-financial Poverty: The financial measure plays an important role in determining levels of poverty globally. However, due to the complex global context, there may be cases where people are not living in financial poverty but still lack access to basic human needs such as clean water or education. There are many reasons why a person with income not considered below the poverty line may still lack access to basic human needs, meaning they can be seen as living in non-financial poverty. The causes stem from many issues such as the determinism of geography, war and conflict, or other factors... World Vision has defined: "*Non-financial poverty is a term often used to describe a state of poverty particularly relating to the non-financial aspects of a person's or community's life. Non-*

financial poverty includes aspects such as education, health, security, access to infrastructure services (such as clean water, electricity, transportation), social entitlements, living environment,..." (World Vision, 2023). Social programs and policies therefore often attempt to mitigate non-financial poverty by providing access and opportunities for everyone in the aforementioned aspects, not just focusing on the financial aspect. Assessing and measuring non-financial poverty can be more complex than measuring absolute and relative poverty, as it involves many different aspects of life and quality of living.

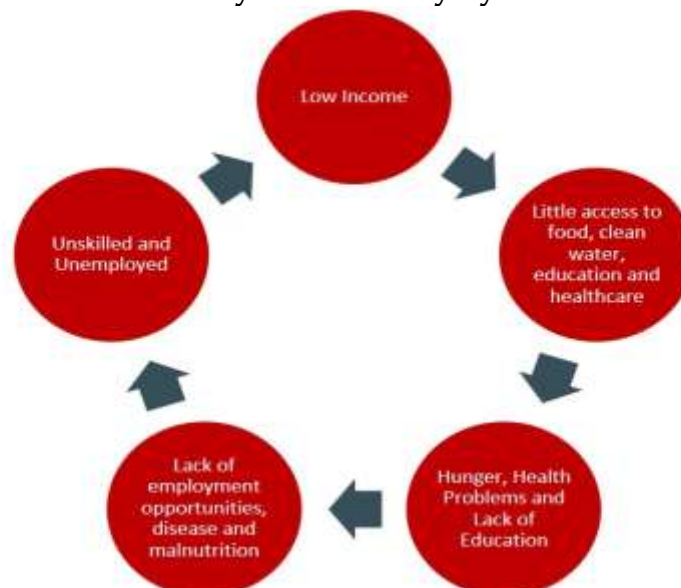
Secondary Poverty: This term was coined by scholar Seebohm Rowntree after his investigation into poverty in the city of York, England. Scholar Mark Freeman has defined it as: "*Secondary poverty is a description of poverty that refers to people living below the poverty line who have enough income to live above the poverty line but instead spend it on things other than life's necessities*" (Freeman, 2011). While both absolute and relative poverty can be defined as different types of "primary poverty", secondary poverty refers to the condition where a person has enough money to buy necessities, yet they spend enough of their financial income on "non-essentials" that too little is left for necessities. Typically, the "non-essentials" referred to when discussing secondary poverty are coping mechanisms or relate to issues of addiction, including: alcohol, gambling, tobacco, or drugs. These banned substances or addictive activities are one of the most common contributing factors to secondary poverty, causing people to find themselves in a position where they feel compelled to spend their income satisfying addictions rather than accessing necessities.

2. Theories Related to Poverty Research

2.1. The "Vicious Cycle of Poverty" Theory by N. Lewis

This theory was first proposed in 1955 by the English economist Nicholas Stern Lewis in his book "The Theory of Economic Growth". The theory argues that poverty exists and reproduces itself due to the interaction between socio-economic factors, forming a vicious cycle unless there is an external intervention. Scholar Lewis specifically explained the factors through Figure 1:

Figure 1. The Vicious Cycle of Poverty by Nicholas Stern Lewis



Source: Author

- Low income: The poor typically have very low incomes, insufficient to pay for basic needs like food, housing, and health care. They are unable to save or invest for the future.

- Limited access to food, clean water, education, and health care: With limited income, the poor cannot afford essential needs like food, sanitation, health care, and education. This seriously affects their quality of life.

- Hunger, health issues, and education: The consequence of not meeting basic needs is malnutrition, disease, and low educational attainment. These factors limit the ability to work and increase income.

- Lack of employment opportunities, illness, and malnutrition: Due to poor health and low education levels, the poor lack the skills and opportunities for stable employment to improve their situation. They are trapped in the vicious cycle of poverty.

- Economic decline: Prolonged poverty leads to declining labor productivity and economic growth. This further exacerbates the poverty situation on a larger scale.

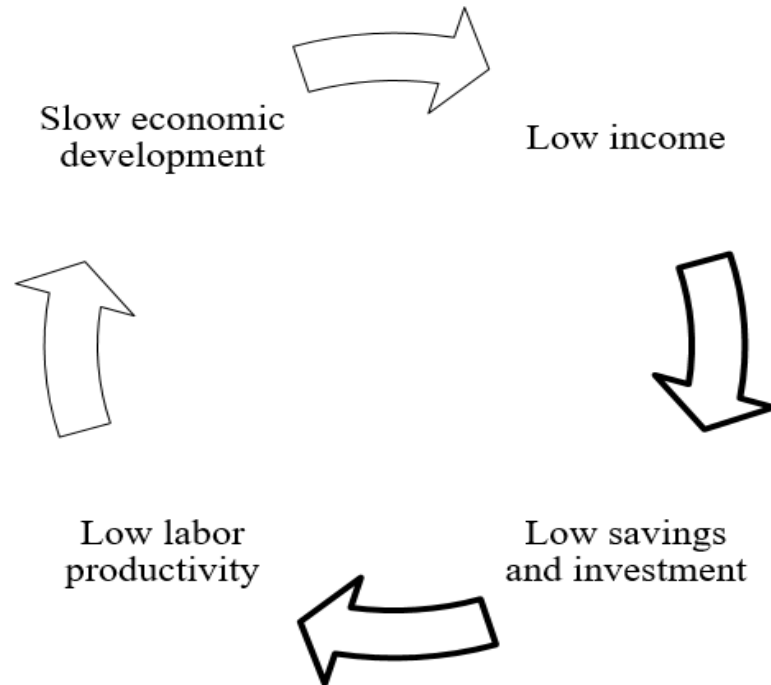
These factors interact with each other, forming a vicious cycle that makes the poor increasingly impoverished and unable to escape poverty. The cycle of poverty stems from low income, leading to an inability to meet basic needs, which in turn reproduces and deepens the poverty situation. According to this theory, to address poverty, improvements must be made simultaneously to the factors in this vicious cycle, such as increasing income, improving education, applying science and technology, controlling population growth...intervening in just one isolated factor is ineffective. In summary, Lewis' vicious cycle theory of poverty has outlined the mechanism by which poverty persists and is passed down through generations via the interaction of socio-economic factors. This is one of the important theories explaining the causes and nature of poverty.

2.2. The "Vicious Circle" and "Big Push" Theory of Samuelson

This theory was developed by scholar Paul Anthony Samuelson based on N. Lewis' "vicious circle" theory of poverty. Accordingly, Samuelson shares the neoclassical view that there are 04 root factors influencing economic growth, including: human resources, natural resources, capital, and technology. Scholar Samuelson argued that these factors are scarce in developing countries, so combining the 04 factors faces major obstacles. As a result, many poor countries are caught in the "vicious circle" of poverty. Samuelson argued that poverty exists and sustains itself due to the interplay of the following factors:

- Low income → Low savings and investment
- Low investment → Low labor productivity
- Low labor productivity → Slow economic development
- Slow economic development → Low income

Figure 2. Samuelson's Poverty Vicious Circle



Source: Author

Through Figure 2, it shows that these 04 factors form a “vicious circle” that makes the poor increasingly impoverished and unable to escape poverty. Therefore, Samuelson argued that to escape the “vicious circle” of poverty, there needs to be a “big push” from the outside. The “push” is government intervention through economic policies to break that vicious circle. Policies may include: financial support, technology investment, land reform, education development... to increase productivity and income. As incomes rise, people can save and invest more, further increasing productivity, thereby breaking the “vicious circle”.

In summary, Samuelson argued that to address poverty requires strong government intervention through policies to create an external “big push” to help people escape the “vicious circle”. This is one of the important theories about the role of the government in poverty reduction.

2.3. The Theory of Rational Choice by Coleman

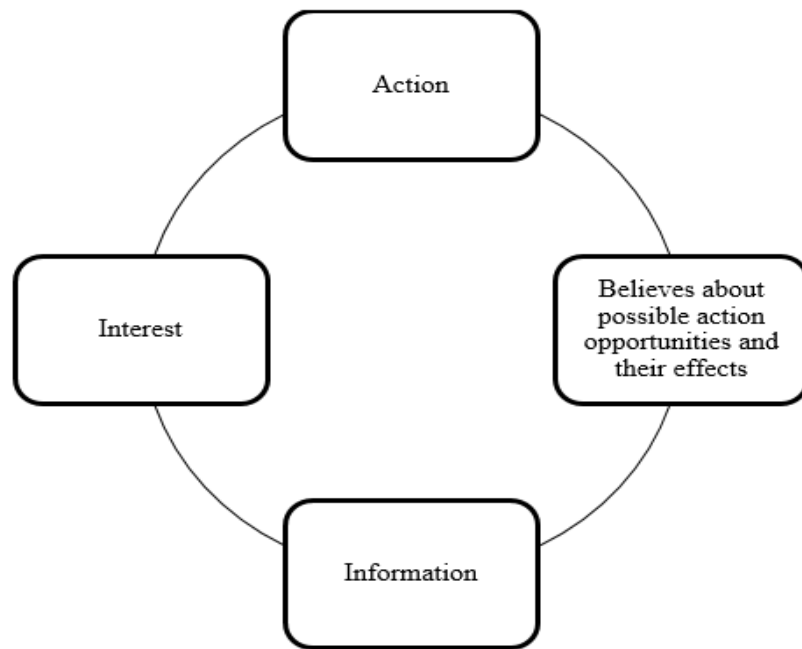
The theory of rational choice is a theory in the field of sociology used to explain the phenomenon of poverty. This theory was proposed and developed in the 1980s-1990s by the American sociologist James Coleman. According to this theory, poverty is primarily the result of the rational choices of individuals in the context of their limited resources and opportunities. Specifically:

The poor face scarcity of resources, both material and intellectual. They lack capital, land, tools, education, skills, social networks, etc. In that context, the poor are forced to choose the most rational ways to adapt and survive. They find ways that yield the highest possible efficiency with their limited resources. For

example: due to lack of land, they choose to grow short-term, low-yield but fast-harvesting crops; due to lack of capital, they do not invest long-term but only operate on a small scale; due to inability to save, they have to spend all their current meager income... Those choices seem rational in the short term to adapt to circumstances. But in the long run, it makes it harder for them to rise out of poverty.

Through Figure 3, Coleman argues that the poor will choose the most rational action based on the 04 factors above. They will choose the action that they believe will produce the best outcome they care about, provided they have enough information to evaluate.

Figure 3. Coleman's Rational Choice Model



Source: Author

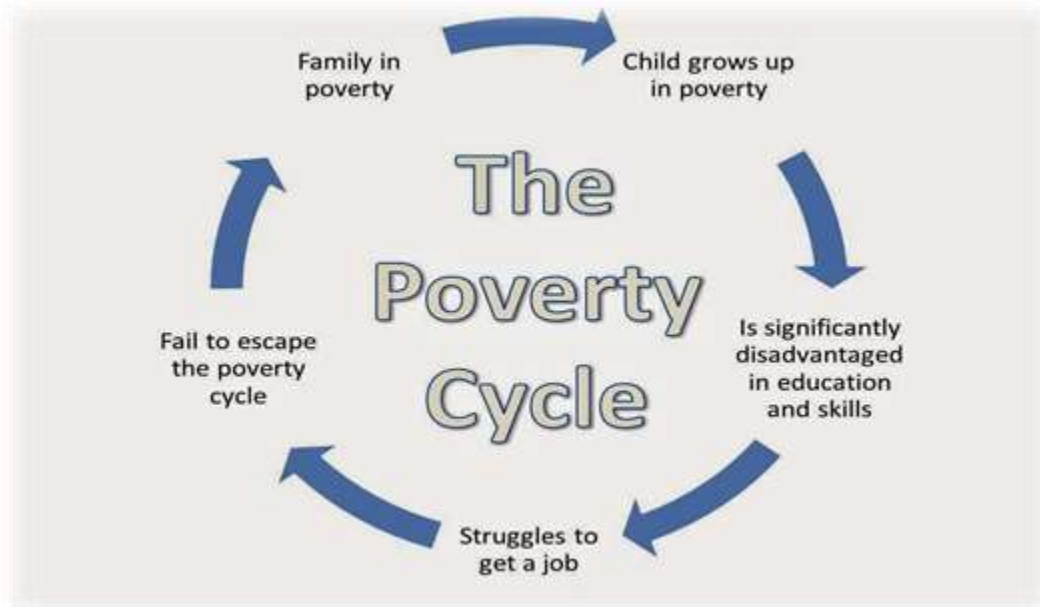
To address poverty, Coleman suggests implementing some specific solutions such as: i) Improving the economic-social environment to increase opportunities and resources for the poor, ii) Changing the nature of the choices available to them. Help them access choices that bring longer-term benefits rather than immediate choices, iii) Providing basic social services so the poor do not have to spend all their resources on the most essential needs.

In summary, Coleman's theory has provided a new approach to understanding the causes and solutions to poverty, based on the concept of individual rational choice in the context of resource constraints. This is one of the important theories explaining the nature of poverty.

2.4. The Culture of Poverty Theory by Oscar Lewis

The culture of poverty theory was first proposed in 1959 by the American anthropologist Oscar Lewis, after he conducted research on the lives of the poor in Mexico.

Figure 4: Oscar Lewis' Culture of Poverty Theory Model



Source: Seat, L.K. (2015). *The Culture of Poverty*.

<https://theviewfromthisseat.blogspot.com/2015/05/the-culture-of-poverty.html>

Scholar Oscar Lewis argued that poverty is not just an economic issue but also a cultural one. Accordingly, poverty arises from the formation of a distinct culture of the poor. He identified the following characteristics of the culture of poverty (see Figure 4):

- Helplessness, dependency and passivity: The poor tend to depend on outside help and lack initiative in life.
- Feeling of hopelessness and bleak future: The poor lack motivation to strive to improve their lives.
- Low aspirations: They have low expectations of themselves, their children, and society.
- Conservatism, lack of innovation: The poor do not tend to innovate or be creative to change their lives.
- Valuing the present: The poor only care about their immediate life, not the future.
- Emphasis on luck: The poor blame fate and luck rather than believing in individual effort.
- Loose family ties: Family relationships lack strength and frequently break down.
- Violence and crime: Poor societies tend to have higher rates of violence and crime.

Oscar Lewis argued that this culture contributes to perpetuating and reproducing poverty. It is passed down from one generation to the next through the socialization process. Therefore, to address poverty, this culture needs to change, not just relying on economic measures.

In summary, this theory highlighted the important role that cultural and social factors play in sustaining poverty. It is one of the key theories explaining the nature of poverty and providing a new perspective on how to address it.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this research synthesizing theoretical approaches to poverty reduction and livelihoods for the poor globally provide important insights and open up avenues for further discussion. Several key points emerge from analyzing the seminal theories presented.

Lewis's (1955) "vicious cycle of poverty" theory offers a compelling causal model elucidating how various socioeconomic factors interact in a reinforcing cycle to perpetuate deprivation over generations (Eskelinen, 2011). This highlights the need for multidimensional interventions simultaneously targeting income, education, healthcare, employment and economic growth rather than isolated initiatives. Samuelson's (Freeman, 2011) allied "vicious circle" concept similarly underscores systematic resource constraints inhibiting developing nations' progress, calling for a government-driven "big push" across sectors like finance, technology and human capital investment. Both theories advocate coordinated, holistic national strategies.

However, Coleman's (1980s-1990s) rational choice theory (Bowpitt, 2000) presents an opposing view - positing poverty as rooted in individuals' constrained but rational choices to optimize limited means. This seems to discount structural factors and could be construed as victim-blaming, unlike Lewis and Samuelson's models which emphasize societal-level deprivation traps. Nonetheless, Coleman usefully highlights improving individuals' environments and available choices as potential solutions.

Lewis's (1959) "culture of poverty" idea offers another distinct perspective by conceptualizing poverty as a self-sustaining cultural phenomenon characterized by helplessness, hopelessness, low aspirations and dysfunctional value systems (Hennock, 1991). This suggests poverty may persist even if economic conditions improve, unless underpinned by efforts to transform mindsets, motivation and social norms. However, critiques of this theory have argued it stereotypes and blames the poor unfairly (Bradley, 2009).

Collectively, these seminal theories showcase the multidimensional, complex nature of poverty. Their divergences reflect disciplinary lenses - with Lewis (1955) and Samuelson rooted in economics, Coleman in sociology's rational choice traditions, and Lewis's (1959) anthropological cultural framing. This plurality underscores poverty's intersecting material and non-material drivers requiring holistic analysis and responses (Gazeley & Newell, 2000).

Interestingly, more recent perspectives have built on these theories while aiming to provide more nuanced, contextualized understandings (Freeman & Bliss, 2004). The scholarship has shifted from binaries of economic determinism or culture, towards exploring their interplay and specificity across communities (Gillie, 2000; Bradley, 2009, pp. 96-100). Increasing attention has also been paid to intersections with gender, ethnicity and spatial dimensions of poverty (Brown,

1968. These evolutions reflect poverty's kaleidoscopic, locally-embedded realities.

Moving forward, continuing to synthesize latest research while considering innovations like multidimensional poverty metrics (Grub, 1902) can enrich theorizations. Collaborative knowledge co-production with affected communities is also crucial for grounding theories in lived experiences (Brown, 1968). Such efforts can advance more transformative, sustainable solutions negotiating economic, social and cultural change.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study has provided a comprehensive overview and synthesis of the seminal theoretical approaches to understanding poverty and livelihoods for the poor globally. The analysis highlights the multidimensional, complex nature of poverty, with various causal factors interacting across economic, social, cultural, and structural domains. The "vicious cycle" and "vicious circle" theories by Lewis and Samuelson respectively elucidate how deprivation is perpetuated through reinforcing feedback loops of low income, inadequate access to basic needs, limited productivity, and economic stagnation. These models underscore the need for coordinated, multisectoral national interventions targeting multiple drivers simultaneously.

In contrast, Coleman's rational choice theory frames poverty as stemming from individuals' constrained but rational decisions to optimize limited resources, suggesting improving socioeconomic environments and available choices as potential solutions. Meanwhile, Lewis's "culture of poverty" concept views deprivation as a self-sustaining cultural phenomenon of helplessness, low aspirations and dysfunctional values. While differing in their emphases, these seminal theories collectively highlight poverty's multidimensionality and the importance of negotiating both material and non-material change. More recent scholarship has moved beyond binary framings towards nuanced understandings of economic and cultural interplays contextualized to local realities.

To further advance transformative, sustainable solutions, continued research synthesizing latest perspectives, incorporating innovations like multidimensional poverty metrics, and prioritizing collaborative knowledge co-production with affected communities is recommended. Such efforts can ground theory in lived experiences while fostering holistic strategies spanning economic empowerment, social inclusion, and cultural change. Ultimately, this study underscores that eradicating poverty globally requires long-term, coordinated commitment addressing its complex, context-specific roots through multifaceted policy responses informed by rigorous theoretical understanding. The insights synthesized here can guide governments, development agencies and civil society in formulating evidence-based national poverty reduction strategies towards achieving dignified, prosperous livelihoods for all.

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