

Revisiting the Sociological Theories of Poverty: Conceptualizing a Framework for Rural Poverty in the Philippines

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Abstract

This paper is a systematic review of the theories distilled from the contemporary literatures on rural poverty in the Philippines. There are five sociological theories which explain the rural poverty in the country: individual attributes, culture, and religious beliefs; access and entitlements; political and economic situation; social circumstances; and unpredicted shocks. Accordingly, rural poverty is still individual phenomena affected by wider economic, political and societal circumstances that lead the rural poor to greater inequality. Using the framework developed from five theories, it is essential that the government and development planners to consider foremost individual attributes while considering their culture and beliefs. They also must ensure the access to essential resources, institutionalized favorable political and economic environment that will benefit them, promote equality, and provide safety nets to lessen the vulnerability to unpredicted shocks.

Keywords: Rural Poverty, Philippines, Rural Sociology, Poverty Theories, Multidimensional Poverty

1. Introduction

Poverty is a longtime universal concern. In the Philippines, poverty is still a rural phenomenon (ADB, 2009). Since most rural community development efforts aim to relieve causes or symptoms of poverty, it makes a difference which theory of poverty is believed to be responsible for the problem being addressed (Bradshaw, 2005). Essentially, poverty can be understood through multiple social science perspectives (Austin, 2007) which include economics (Jung & Smith, 2007), psychology (Turner & Lehning, 2007), anthropology (Frerer & Vu, 2007), political science (Lehning, 2007) and sociology (Wolf, 2007). However, some poverty eradication projects aim to address only some causes of poverty but not poverty as

a whole. Hence, the goal of this paper is to develop a framework of different theories which can be distilled from the discourse of rural poverty in the Philippines. This is essential in order to develop a more responsive poverty eradication project or programs among development efforts of the government and non-government organizations.

There is no single definition of poverty. It has multiple meanings and is 'linked through a series of resemblances' (Spicker, 2006). Spicker, then defined poverty as a material concept which is based on the notion of the need, patterns of deprivation, and limited resources. He argued that poverty is 'lack of material goods and services', 'existence of deprivation' and 'circumstances in which people lack the income, wealth and resources to acquire or consume the things which they need'. This concept of poverty is related to the definition of absolute poverty and multiple deprivation or consensual poverty. Absolute poverty, as UNESCO (2016) defined it, 'measures poverty in relation to the amount of basic needs such as food clothing and shelter'. Multiple deprivation or consensual poverty, on the other hand, was first conceptualized in the United Kingdom and is defined as those 'lack of resources forces them to line below a publicly agreed minimum standard'. These definitions of poverty is related to the nature of poverty in rural communities where most people perceived themselves poor due to the absence or inadequacy of basic needs and resources that they need. These rural poor are deprived from the access of basic social services and are battling over the limited common-pool resources available in their own localities.

Spicker further elucidated another concept of poverty - poverty as an economic circumstance. In this concept, he defined poverty in terms of standard of living, inequality, and economic position. The definition of poverty herein is akin to the most common measures of poverty - income, hence, one is poor if he/she has low income. Further, here, poverty is described as the inability to attain the minimum standard of living, disadvantage compared to others in society and economic position in society. The definition is analogous to the concept of relative

poverty wherein the measure of being poor is based on the comparison to the majority of people in the society (Moller, Huber, Stephens, Bradley & Nielsen, 2003).

The third concept of poverty according to Spicker is the social circumstances. Herein, he views poverty according to the social class, dependency, lack of basic security, lack of entitlements and exclusion. Accordingly, the idea of poverty is not only on all people with low income but those who has low socio-economic status, dependent to aids, living under struggle and vulnerable to social risk, lack of rights, and excluded from participation in the normal pattern of social life. This idea is similar to social exclusion as a definition of poverty. According to Dewde (2003) social exclusion is the inability to fully participate in society, caused by low income, unemployment, poor housing, and bad neighbors. The last concept of poverty is related to moral judgement. Here Spicker defined poverty as consisting of 'serious deprivation and people are held to be poor when their material circumstances are deemed to be morally unacceptable.

The Philippine Statistics Authority has reported that the poverty incidence among Filipino in 2015 registered at 21.6%. Poverty incidence is the proportion of people below the poverty line to the population (PSA, 2016a). Fishermen, and farmers remains the poorest basic sectors in the Philippines (PSA, 2016b) and are from the rural areas with poverty incidence of 39.2% and 38.3%, respectively. The subsistence of rural poor on fishing and farming along with illiteracy, unemployment, and bigger family size correlates with higher poverty rate.

Rural community in the Philippines is the subject of this paper because majority of the people in the Philippines reside in rural areas and almost three-fourths of the rural populace are poor. Rural communities in the Philippines are characterized in many forms. Typically, homes are made of bamboo or wood from coconut trees, with thatched roofs, usually dependent on agriculture and common-pool resources available in the community. In some barrio, the concept of *Gemeinschaft* still exists where bonds and close ties among neighbors and the concept of *bayanihan* are still in practice.

Correspondingly, rural poverty is explained through a sociological perspective. According to Brady (2011), the focus of sociology of poverty is on the nature, causes and consequences of poverty. In addition, Shildrick& Rucell (2015) claimed that understanding poverty through sociological perspective focuses on the 'structure and organization of society and how this relates to social problems and individual lives'. Studies on poverty sociologically can be traced in the mid-1800s although the poverty per se was not much of the topic but nevertheless, their insights are related to social structure, economic order and inequalities (Shildrick&Rucell, 2015). These prominent theorists include Marx and Engels' capitalism, Durkheim's functional necessities of social inequality, Weber's importance of power and prestige, and Comte's radical upheaval and change on society.

Classic and contemporary theorists have developed multiple perspectives on how to understand poverty. These includes liberal theories of poverty, the culture of poverty theory, structural theory, Marxist theory, conflict theory, vicious cycle theory, functionalist theory, the cycle of deprivation, and many others. Bradshaw (2007) grouped most of these theories into five: individual deficiency, cultural belief systems that support subcultures in poverty; political-economic distortions; geographical disparities, and cumulative and circumstance origin. In view of this, the paper reviews the literature of poverty among rural communities in the Philippines and distilled the theories of poverty within the articles.

2. Sources and Approaches

The approach of this paper is a systematic review of the literature of rural poverty in the Philippines. It begins with searching a literature through the internet using the scientific article search engines but limited only to Google Scholar, JSTOR, and Science Direct by inputting the phrase 'rural poverty in the Philippines' for the period covering 2000-2016. After which, it underwent abstract review to set apart related literature that provides related variables which are significantly related to causing poverty in the rural communities in the Philippines.

The final stage was the reading of the whole articles and distillation of the theories based on the identified variables.

3. Sociological Theories of Rural Poverty in the Philippines

There are five theories of poverty which can be distilled from the articles related to rural poverty in the Philippines. These five theories explain the nature and causes of poverty in the rural Philippines. These includes individual attributes, culture, and religious beliefs; access and entitlements; political and economic situation, social circumstances, and unpredicted shocks.

I. Individual Attributes And Beliefs

Laziness, by thefact, is the common answer of the Filipinos when ask why many are poor. In fact, the colonizer had observed this attribute to the Filipinos. More than a century ago, Dr. Jose Rizal wrote 'On the Indolence of the Filipinos' in which he recognized the existence of indolence among Filipinos. Nevertheless, Rizal did not see this as inherent flaws of the country but rather on the effect of the circumstances the country is facing during that time. Aside from the 'hot temperature', Rizal argued that indolence among Filipino are caused by 'social disorders' including 'abuse and discrimination, government inaction, rampant corruption and red tape, misplaced Church doctrines and bad examples from Spaniards who led lives of indolence (Habito, 2014).

The 'culture of poverty' is a commonly contested theory of poverty. Oscar Lewis coined this term in his book entitled 'The Children of Sanchez' in 1961. In his ethnographic studies of small Mexican communities, he uncovered approximately 50 attributes shared within these communities: frequent violence, lack of sense of history, neglect of planning for the future, and many others (Lewis, 1961). Similarly, in the case study of Tuason (2002) among the two Filipina wherein one became rich and the other stayed poor, she uncovered the cultures of poverty that exist: early marriages, bigger family size, not-well compensated hardwork, commitment to a strong family system and are highly indebted to parent with an

intense need to give back or 'utangnaloob', family centeredness, deprivation of dreams, help from others 'swerte' and reliance on God.

Early marriage among rural poor especially the indigenous people are prevalent in the Philippines. In the study of Sighn& Samara (1996), the average age of marriage among Filipino women from 1965-1994 is at the age of 21 years old. Consequently, this leads to bigger family size which is one of the ubiquitous causes of poverty in the rural Philippines. The empirical studies of Bayudan-Dacuycuy& Lim (2013), Reyes et al. (2012) and Hossain (2000) claimed that poverty is associated with bigger family size. Religious fundamentalism (Ruiz Austria, 2004), perceived side effects (Biddlecom, et al., 1997) and excessive cost of contraception (Casterline, et al., 1997) hinder the Filipino couple in using contraceptives. In effect, population growth increases in rural communities which also causes poverty (Schelzig, 2005).

Greater dependence on agriculture is also a reason for poverty in the rural area (Reyes, et al, 2012; Hossain, 2000). The more the family relies on agriculture, the greater is the poverty incidence. This is also due to lack of innovation and the absence of entrepreneurial spirit among rural poor. Bigger family size and dependence on agriculture is also related to lower educational achievement. Lack of knowledge, heavily relying on myth and superstition lead to population growth and lack of skills and education lead to unemployment.

Echavez, Montillo-Burton, McNiven, and Quisumbing (2007) describes the rural poor in Bukidnon, province of the Philippines, with the ladder of life-based on her their documentation on the focus groups: (i) have no land and other assets; (ii) are daily wage earners with very low income; (iii) are seasonal workers with unstable incomes; (iv) are working as farm labourer at least two and sometime six or more children; (v) lack of education or have low levels of education; and have vices (smoking, drinking, and gambling).

II. Access and Entitlements

This theory is based on 'Theory of Access' of Ribot and Peluso. According to them, access is more than the property relations among many by which people

gain, control, and maintain resources access. They expanded the notion of 'bundle of rights' to 'bundle of powers' in which social and political-economic influence the access of resources – technology, capital, market, labor, knowledge, authority, identity and social relations (Ribot & Peluso, 2008). In rural Philippines lack of access to resources and entitlements are the major causes of poverty (Schelzig, 2005). These essential assets include human capital, financial capital, natural capital, social capital and informational capital. Deprivation of the access of these resources leads to poverty.

a. Human Capital

Skills and education enabled rural households to move out of poverty. This is consistent with Hossain, *et al.*, (2001), Echavez, *et al.*, (2007) and Reyes *et al.*, (2012) who claimed that inequality in education leads to income inequality. ADB (2009) also argued that poverty is strongly linked to educational attainment. Accordingly, two-thirds of the poor households are headed by people with only an elementary school education or below. Access to quality education, thus, is a key pathway out of poverty. However, according to Schelzig, (2005), three challenges persist in Philippines educational system: declining participation rates, poor quality of education, and low cohort survival rates.

Access to health care also posts a major problem in the Philippines with a high risk of maternal mortality rates, very high incidence of tuberculosis, poor quality and inaccessibility of public healthcare services especially in rural areas (Schelzig, 2005). According to Doorslaer, *et al.* (2006) payment for healthcare posts a serious problem among rural poor.

b. Physical Capital

Rural poor in the Philippines usually lack access to water and sanitation (Reyes, *et al.*, 2012) and infrastructure, especially irrigation (Hussain, 2001) and farm to the market road (Schelzig, 2005). According to WHO (2016), about 7 million Filipinos in 2015 have resorted to open defecation, wherein 85% of which are from rural areas without toilet facilities. Since most of the poor people in rural areas are farmers, lack or dysfunctional irrigation facilities unable them to plant crops for a

certain season. According to Kelly (2000) irrigation systems in the country is falling into disrepair.

c. Financial Capital

Rural poor are deprived of the access to financial products and services (Kondo, et al., 2008). Lack of access to credit, deprived the poor from participating to enterprise or livelihood development which enable them to enhance their creativity and innovativeness for the enterprising purpose. Although microfinance institutions (MFIs) exist in the Philippines, their clients are still not the poor but the existing or micro-entrepreneurs (Milgram, 2007). Thus, the poor limits themselves to what they have and have no access to working capital (Echavez, et al., 2007) resulting them to avail to unlicensed money lender or locally known as 'Bombay' (Indian money lender) or 5-6 (money lender with excessive interest).

d. Natural Capital

Lack of access to land (Llanto & Ballesteros, 2003; Hossain, 2001) and not owning it (Reyes, et al., 2012) is the major cause of poverty in the rural area. These landless rural poor serve as tenants, agri-workers or laborers who received very low wages in an uneven working environment. Unsuccessful land reforms in the Philippines worsen the scenario. There is an increasing land shortage caused by population growth, sequestration of lands by the state and agencies linked to it; closing of land frontier and concentration of land in a small class of landed household (Hayami & Kikuchi, 2000). Environmental degradation also poses serious threats among rural poor due to over cropping, over-grazing, and other non-sustainable cultivation practices, deforestation and other associated with environmental degradation (Rigg, 2006)

e. Informational Capital

In the study of Flor (2001) she unveiled the indisputable link between Information and Communication Technology (ICT) and poverty. Her main propositions in the study are: 'information leads to resources; information leads to opportunities that generate resources; access to information leads to access to resources, and access

to information leads to access to opportunities that generates resources. However, most of the rural poor have no access to ICT or naïve in using the internet.

f. Political and Economic Situation

The theory focuses not on the individual but on the political and economic situation that leads the individual to poverty. The existing relevant theories include the structural theory of poverty which can also be classified to conflict theory, neo-liberalism, world systems perspective, and dependency theory. Structural explanation of poverty blames ‘capitalism’ in the existence and persistence of poverty on wider society or the government. The basic notion of structural theory is that ‘capitalism creates a condition that promotes poverty’ (Sameti, Esfahani, & Haghighi, 2002). According to Marxist view, poverty is inevitable under capitalism and views all proletariat as poor and the bourgeoisie pays them low wages in order to maximize profit and hence, the proletariat suffer from false consciousness, thinking their wage are fair and reasonable. In rural Bukidnon, for example, the farm-laborers earn very low daily wages while suffering from the uneven working environment which requires physical strengths.

In some literatures, rural poverty is blamed due to short duration of growth, dominance of oligarchic political regime, industrialization, (Balisacan, 2000, 2004) DOHA agreements, world trade and domestic liberalization (Cororaton, et al., 2005; Cororaton, 2006; Cororaton & Cockburn, 2007) economic openness (Pernia & Quising, 2002), World Bank market-led agrarian reform (Borras, 2007a), and food inflation (Fujii, 2013). Accordingly, the political and economic situation in the country both in the past and in the present contributes to the persistent of poverty in rural areas.

g. Social Circumstances

Social factors also cause poverty. Theories such as the functionalist, the vicious cycle of poverty and the cycle of deprivation are some of the related theories which explain the societal causes of poverty. Functionalist explains poverty based on the function of the individual in the society. It argues that all

parts of the society, even poverty, contribute in some way or another to a larger system's stability. To illustrate, here are some of the examples of its functions: poverty creates job for the middle class such as police officers, social workers and the like; poverty help the economy – poor resort to spend money when they have; poverty ensures that all jobs are filled in society – the poor will take up dull, dangerous, dirty jobs that no one else works. Vicious cycle and cycle of deprivation, on the other hand, contends the individualistic view of poverty and blames poverty to the society. Both theories agree that those children who born into poverty had same norms and values as amainstream society. Low pay due to theinsensitive boss, lack of jobs due to discrimination among educated and non-educated, and low quality of schools due to thelow quality of teachers and poor environment and so on are some of the causes of poverty as the said theories view it.

Social exclusion is part of these theories. The most socially excluded or discriminated social group in the country are the ethnic minority groups or the indigenous peoples (IPs). The perception of superiority among themajor ethnic group in the country socially excluded them in participating insocial gatherings and accessing the basic services of the government. In the study of Echavez, et al. (2007), they underscore the discrimination among the Lumad in Mindanao, southern island of the Philippines, leads the IP group to persistent poverty growth rate. This IP group cannot avail of the social and health services the government is extending due to the distance. Illiteracy, unsanitary, and their indigenous beliefs and rituals also hinder them not to avail the services. Ethnicity also hinders them to continue to schooling because they refuse to due to the discrimination from lowland teachers and students. They are also unable to avail the loans from informal or formal lending institutions, even if they have collateral because they are perceived to be unable to repay loans.

h. Unpredicted Shocks

There are also some factors that hinder the rural poor from moving out of poverty. Some literaturedescribes this as 'poverty traps'. Unpredicted shocks include natural calamities, financial and economic crisis, health condition, and

conflict arises. The presence of these traps impedes the growth or slide back the household to poverty.

Many studies in the Philippines attach poverty to natural calamities. Baez (2013) claimed that increased frequency and severity of weather shocks and the lack of the capacity to adapt to climate change hampers the rural poor to development. These uneven weather conditions obstruct them to maximize their income from agriculture since according to Bayudan-Dacuycuyand Lim (2013), Datt and Hoogeneen (2003) and Reyes, Tabuga, Asis, and Datu (2012) droughts and El Niño affects the livelihood of the rural poor and has a great effect on the prevalence of poverty. Another, unpredicted shock that fetters the rural poor from development is the financial crisis. Two financial crises affect the Philippines – the Asian Financial Crisis in 1997 and Global Financial Crisis in 2009. According to the previously cited literature, these crises had minimal effect in the Philippines but also affected the rural poor due to the retrenchment, decline in the agricultural export and other factors.

Poor health is the number-one poverty trigger. It can quickly tip people into poverty, specifically those already near the bottom of the socioeconomic ladder who lack health insurance or substantial savings to cover out-of-pocket healthcare costs. The financial repercussions related to health shocks also have the power to keep poor people submerged in poverty by quickly depleting any of their accumulated wealth with often exorbitant medical bills (Thomas & Paden, 2009)

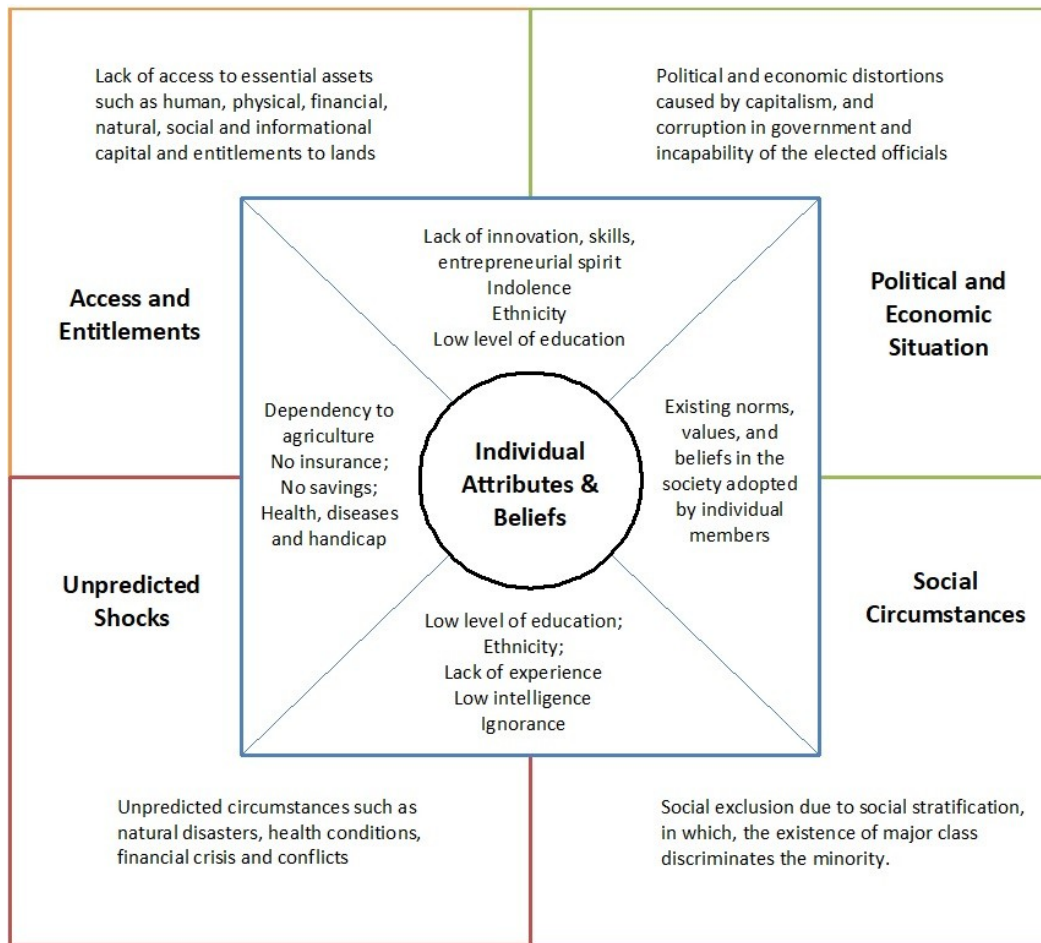
4. Conceptual Framework Of Rural Poverty In The Philippines

From the five theories of poverty distilled from the literature of rural poverty in the Philippines, a conceptual framework was developed. The framework posits that individual attributes and belief are the foremost cause of poverty among rural populace. Accordingly, the four other equally important theory- access and entitlement, political and economic situation, social circumstances and unpredicted shocks lead or trigger the individual's attributes and beliefs to poverty or hinder them from moving out of poverty. On the framework, aside from the five theories

are the variables attributable to individuals in causing poverty. Its relationship to the theoretical propositions is displayed on the framework.

There are variables that are vulnerable to the external factors and were identified in the literature that affect or have relationships to the other theories. Lack of education and ethnicity, for instance, is universal to all theories. Uneducated rural poor are usually deprived of the access to resources, can easily be distorted by the political and economic situation, socially excluded from majority class, and are vulnerable to unpredicted shocks. Ethnicity among indigenous people, on the other hand, tends to be the cause of exclusion among individual from access to basic government services and other essential resources. In some instances, their ancestral lands were acquired by the economic elites making some of them landless and forced to transfer to upland communities. They are also the most socially excluded group in the rural Philippines where discrimination rampant to major ethnic groups among them is. Further, their rituals, indigenous knowledge, and beliefs are also vulnerable to unpredicted shocks such as in health and natural calamities. However, these variables need more research undertakings due to inadequacy of contemporary researches on the discourse of rural poverty in the Philippines.

Figure 1. Conceptual Framework of Rural Poverty in the Philippines



5. Conclusion

The sociology of poverty can explain the nature, causes and consequences of poverty. The paper has expounded the theories distilled from the contemporary literatures. From then, in rural Philippines there are five sociological theories which could explain poverty: individual attributes, culture, and religious beliefs; access and entitlements; political and economic situation; social circumstances; and unpredicted shocks. These theories are important in framing a poverty reduction program for the rural communities in the Philippines. This framework also suggests that rural poverty in the Philippines is multidimensional. This supports Sen's (2001) argument that an income-based measure of poverty cannot adequately capture the poverty of a person because it fails to consider whether they can use those incomes to achieve their capabilities. Hence, it also supports the claims of

the poverty scholars such as Bourguignon and Chakravarty (2003), Tsui (2002), and Alkire and Foster (2011) that poverty is a multidimensional phenomenon.

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