



## Untold stories: the human face of poverty dynamics

### Key Points

- Life histories offer an important window for policy makers, and should be brought to the policy table much more frequently.
- Life histories show the human face of chronic poverty. Such vignettes provide concrete examples of poverty traps – such as insecurity, social discrimination and poor working conditions – and how poor people struggle to escape them.
- The vignettes presented here illustrate how social protection measures have improved the wellbeing of four out of five selected individuals. They also show the importance of kin and social networks, and how these connections can have ambivalent effects.
- Whilst life histories are not representative, they highlight key *themes* and *processes* which are 'typical' of individuals with similar sets of sociobiographical characteristics who live in similar social, economic and political circumstances.

### Introduction

To show the human face of chronic poverty, this policy brief offers vignettes from the life stories of five people. The lives of **Maymana** and **Mofizul, Bakyt, Vuyiswa** and **Angel** demonstrate the varied and multiple causes of chronic poverty, and how social protection has, in some cases, helped them improve their wellbeing.

The policy brief suggests that such **life history material can be an important source of data for policy**. Decision makers tend to rely on quantitative data to inform their decisions, in particular headcount poverty figures (often derived from large-scale, random sample surveys). It is easy to understand the reasons why. Such data can describe the incidence, severity and spatial distribution of poverty. Moreover, it can highlight important correlates of poverty, and can allow for the efficient targeting of scarce resources. However, quantitative data cannot tell us everything about poverty. Relying solely on such data means that poverty becomes an abstract concept, wrenched from its

context and from the relations in which it is embedded.

In contrast, the five vignettes presented here provide **concrete examples of how chronically poor people work hard to try and escape from poverty**. The life stories presented here illustrate the complexity and hardships involved in making a living, the important role of kin and social networks, and how chronic poverty is experienced as harm and pain by an individual. In this sense, **life history material is one way of bringing chronic poverty to the policy table**. And whilst such material is not representative, we argue that **such material can highlight key themes and processes** which are 'typical' of individuals with similar sets of sociobiographical characteristics, and who live in similar social, economic and political circumstances. In this sense, it can help to explain why policy may or may not work. For example, the vignettes presented here provide supportive evidence for our arguments about poverty traps. In this policy brief we focus on three of these traps: **insecurity, social**

### What is Chronic Poverty?

The distinguishing feature of chronic poverty is extended duration in absolute poverty. Therefore, chronically poor people always, or usually, live below a poverty line, which is normally defined in terms of a money indicator (e.g. consumption, income, etc.), but could also be defined in terms of wider or subjective aspects of deprivation. This is different from the transitorily poor, who move in and out of poverty, or only occasionally fall below the poverty line.



**discrimination and poor working conditions.** Before turning to these traps, we introduce the five individuals whose lives we attempt to describe.

## Living in chronic poverty

We start with **Maymana** and **Mofizul** in rural Bangladesh. Maymana is a widow. Her son, Mofizul, is in his early 20s, and recently married a young cousin. Mofizul suffers from an impairment – a severely hunched back – that makes physical work difficult. Mother, son and daughter-in-law live in a small house in a relative's plot in a reasonably well-connected area of rural Bangladesh. In 2000, the household had very little: no major assets apart from a ramshackle hut. Maymana's husband had recently passed away after a long illness. The cost of private medical treatment had depleted the household's savings and they had sold all but one of their main productive assets: rickshaws. Maymana's in-laws then unjustly seized her land. During this difficult time, they depended on Maymana begging, gleaning and getting occasional maidservant work (which became difficult as her hearing deteriorated). Mofizul also worked, undertaking casual labour when he could find it. The household received some governmental support in the form of a pension and a wheat ration. However, both transfers were intermittent and small.

By 2005, the family was doing a bit better. They had not suffered any major health crises (although one of Maymana's married daughters had died). And drawing on their own meagre savings and some help from Maymana's remaining married daughter, they were able to build a better house and accumulate some simple furniture. Mofizul had also received some treatment for his hunched back (funded by relatives and neighbours). Now older, he was earning higher wages in a brickfield, as a houseboy and in a shop (although demand for his labour was highly variable).

**Bakyt** and his siblings live in Kokyangak, a small town of around 10,000 people in **southern Kyrgyzstan**. Bakyt, an 11-year-old boy, and his two older brothers work as coal miners, earning income to buy food or wood to heat the house. Bakyt's parents divorced when he was young, and his father does not support the family. Around 2002 Bakyt's mother became paralysed and is unable to walk. She is dependent on her children and a state grant of just over \$10/ month. The siblings also take care of their old and infirm grandmother. The brothers are employed as miners because the shafts are extremely small. The work is very dangerous: the shafts have no supports and

could collapse at any time. The children damage their backs hauling the coal out, but working 12 hours in the mine puts food on the table: in autumn and winter months the three brothers earn up to \$5/day collectively. The siblings have other ways of getting money (scavenging or labouring for food), in addition to doing the housework. Most household income is spent on potatoes, pasta, bread and tea, and due to their poor diet, hard work and poverty, the children are frequently sick. None attends school regularly, not only because they have to work, but also because they cannot afford the required books and clothes (especially in the freezing winter).

**Vuyiswa** lives in Khayelitsha, a densely populated informal settlement South East of **Cape Town, South Africa**. Numerous family members from her rural 'home' stay with her in town – some 'permanently', others temporarily. Apart from her shack, Vuyiswa has few assets – a bench, stool, table and paraffin stove. But whilst she is income and asset poor, she is able to draw on a dense network of social relations to eke out a living. Vuyiswa migrated to Cape Town in the 1980s, after the death of her husband in the Eastern Cape.

She was chased away from her dead husband's rural compound, and moved to her brother's shack, from where she intermittently found employment as a domestic worker in the suburbs. She earned enough money to move to her current shack in Khayelitsha, but in 1989 her domestic work came to an end: she

**Poor households with few assets and entitlements have little capacity to cope with shocks.**

broke her leg and, unable to work, was fired. She turned her hand to informal trading, mainly selling vegetables, having received some seed capital from her brother. Such informal trading allowed her to earn an income, despite her limited mobility. In 2000, Vuyiswa was diagnosed with diabetes and since this time has received a disability grant. She has used this grant to support her informal vegetable trading. Vuyiswa's income is not the only income source in the household. Her niece, like Vuyiswa some time ago, is employed as a domestic worker. She now pays for household essentials, and in return Vuyiswa looks after her daughter. Vuyiswa also receives financial support from her boyfriend and brother. Without these connections Vuyiswa would be much, much poorer.

In July 2006, **Angel**, 25, lived alone with her 19-month old son in a tiny tin shack in 'Plot Shumba', a privately owned peri-urban site near a large town in Midlands Province, **Zimbabwe**. Angel was brought up by her mother and grandparents in a rural community. The income from the family's farm paid for her school fees

up to Form 2, but no further. To earn a living, she migrated to town, and took up work as a house girl, leaving her two-year-old son behind. But her employer exploited her: she received no wages, and after a year she quit. During this time her mother had died, and her daughter had been placed in the care of the child's father. Instead of returning 'home', Angel moved to the informal settlement at Plot Shumba and eked out a living by vending. In February 2003, as part of the state's drive against informality, all 50 or so homes in the plot were destroyed. Angel was severely beaten and slept rough at a bus shelter for a month. After the landowner of the plot obtained a court ruling, Angel was able to return and rebuild her house and life. In the next two years Angel's fortunes improved; with the help of a cousin she found a job at a bar in a local gold mine, and fell in love with a goldpanner. However, when the mine closed, both lost their jobs. Angel returned to informal trading, and her boyfriend turned his hand to informal mining. In March 2005, she gave birth to their first son. But soon afterwards her boyfriend died, when the pit he was mining in collapsed. In 2006, the state razed Plot Shumba to the ground as part of Operation *Murambatsvina*, and Angel, now diagnosed HIV positive and with her health failing, is reliant on neighbours and a local NGO to provide food for her and her son.

***Many chronically poor people depend on work which is insecure, low paid, unhealthy, unsafe, and many have little scope to improve their situation.***

ill and sought advice and treatment from a wide range of informal and formal medical practitioners, the family sold assets (rickshaws and land), and reduced consumption to pay for the services. When Hafeez died, Maymana's misfortune worsened: her father-in-law unfairly seized their land. Furthermore, as Maymana's only son, **Mofizul**, has a physical impairment, employers refused to pay him a full adult male wage.

In Kyrgyzstan, **Bakyt's** mother's impairment, and grandmother's age and illness, wrenched him into premature adulthood: working 12-hour days in a coal mine, scavenging bricks from demolition sites, and undertaking household chores. Bakyt tries to fill the role of an adult man, but without the size, strength or experience. It is unsurprising that Bakyt and his siblings suffer from poor health: Bakyt from bronchitis, his sister from anaemia and leg pain, and his eldest brother from back pain. Such health problems increase the chances that each of these children will suffer from chronic poverty and will die prematurely.

Health shocks and morbidity have also been a feature of **Vuyiswa's** life in South Africa. When she broke her leg, Vuyiswa not only lost mobility but also her job, as she was not able to service the needs of her employers. Much later, Vuyiswa was diagnosed with diabetes. Since then, she has received a disability grant which allows her to transact in the local economy and within social networks.

And whilst **Angel's** Zimbabwean childhood was not marred by bad health, HIV/AIDS and TB have taken their toll in young adulthood. Suffering from full-blown AIDS, Angel is unable to care for her 19-month-old baby. When a CPRC researcher met Angel in August 2006, she was gaunt, with dry skin and brittle, reddish brown hair. Her appearance was such that she could be either male or female and almost any age from mid-teens to early 40s (although she was actually only 25). Angel could not start anti-retrovirals until her TB had been successfully treated, and the chances of both Angel and her baby surviving were extremely low.

## Trapped in poverty

The life stories of Maymana and Mofizul, Bakyt, Vuyiswa and Angel show the importance of three poverty traps: the insecurity trap, the social discrimination trap, and poor working conditions.

### ***The insecurity trap***

People who live unprotected within insecure environments often experience an extended duration in poverty. Conflict and violence are sources of insecurity, as are economic crisis and natural hazards. Poor households, with few assets and entitlements, have little capacity to cope with such shocks. Poor people also have less resilience to individual- or household-level shocks, especially ill health. One example comes from Anirudh Krishna's work. This used participatory methods to assess poverty exits and entries in rural locations in Asia, sub-Saharan Africa and Latin America. It found that ill health and the costs of healthcare are the most important reasons for households entering poverty. The life stories described here offer further evidence that ill health and impairment can play a major role in creating and perpetuating poverty.

In Bangladesh, the sickness and death of **Maymana's** husband led to sudden and severe poverty. As Hafeez fell

### ***The social discrimination trap***

The second poverty trap is social discrimination. Social relationships – of power, patronage, empowerment, competition, collaboration, support – can entrap people in exploitative relationships, or help them escape from poverty. Such social structures evolve with local or nationally specific 'social orders', such as class and caste systems, ethnicity or gender-specific roles. Many chronically poor people are bound into negative social relationships that, while protective against destitution, deny them choice and voice, and limit their scope for exit from both the constraining relationship and poverty itself. The lives of Maymana, Vuyiswa and Angel



demonstrate the importance of social discrimination in creating and perpetuating chronic poverty.

**Maymana** suffered from discrimination when her husband died in 1998. Whilst grieving, her father-in-law seized her remaining agricultural land. Maymana had previously sold a portion of her acre of paddy – inherited from her father – to pay for medicine for her husband, but relied on the remaining portion to produce rice. Despite threats and warnings, Maymana tried to assert her rights in the village court, but to no avail. Despite having a strong case in Bangladeshi law, the *shalish*<sup>1</sup> ruled against her (as often happens when women claim rights to land).

Discrimination also played an important part in **Vuyiswa's** life story. Not only did apartheid define her life chances and her movements before 1990, but, in a similar fashion to Maymana, the death of her husband led to the loss of assets. Despite local protocol dictating that she should stay in her dead husband's rural compound in the Eastern Cape and raise their children, Vuyiswa was driven out of the compound by her dead husband's sister. With few alternatives, she moved to her brother's shack in Cape Town, finding casual employment as a domestic worker in the white suburbs.

**Angel's** experience of discrimination has been due to her position in an informal settlement. Like all the residents of Plot Shumba, Angel lost her home in February 2003, as the army demolished Plot Shumba in Operation *Mariawanda*. After rebuilding her shack and life, Angel's home was destroyed again in 2006, as the Zimbabwean army sought to destroy the democratic opposition in the informal settlements.

The effects of negative social relationships are often ambivalent. Bonded labour is both a job and a prison. This is not to say that such relationships, and the social orders on which they are based, are static. Relationships that maintain chronic poverty can be encouraged to change.

### Poor working conditions

Our third trap is that of poor working conditions. Chronically poor people are often found in regions with the least agricultural potential and furthest from the main national markets. With poor transport and infrastructure, they are often locked out of patterns of economic growth. And even when chronically poor people are well integrated into national and international economies, they often gain little. Most of them are 'working poor', but only a small minority are able to benefit from engaging in labour markets. Many chronically poor people depend on work which is insecure, low paid, unhealthy, unsafe, and many have little scope to improve their situation. Without much education, with few assets, and with limited chance of decent work, their opportunities are limited.

Poor working conditions have blighted the lives of

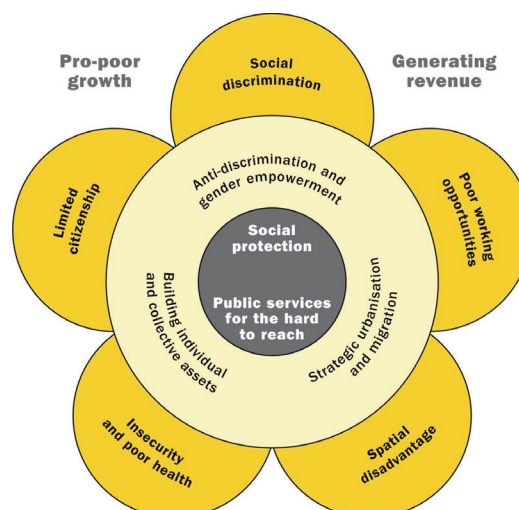
**Vuyiswa, Angel and Bakyt.** For **Vuyiswa**, working under the apartheid regime in Cape Town limited her employment rights and prospects. In the 1980s, Vuyiswa needed to straddle urban Cape Town and the rural Eastern Cape. With no security of employment, her trips back 'home' frequently led to her dismissal. And as we have seen, on one occasion she lost her job after breaking her leg.

**Angel** had a similar experience of domestic work in the Midlands, Zimbabwe. As a young migrant to town, she was lucky and found work as a 'house girl' for a middle class family. But after a year she had to leave, as she was not getting paid. Having nowhere to go, she moved to an informal settlement, built a shack, and re-started her life. But, as her life story tragically shows, living and working in the informal sector has not improved Angel's life. For 11-year-old **Bakyt**, and his two brothers, there is no security of employment or safety at work. As Angel's story illustrates, informal mining can be very dangerous.

One of our vignettes illustrates the difference that better working conditions can make. **Mofizul** entered the labour market in rural Bangladesh when he was only 12. Due to his lack of education and physical impairment (a hunched back), his wages were pitifully low. But as he grew older, his wage rate increased from one-sixth to one-half the adult male rate (although such work was often sporadic). More recently, Mofizul has started earning a full male adult rate, allowing him to invest some of his wages in Maymana's and his house.

The lives of Maymana, Mofizul, Bakyt, Vuyiswa and Angel illustrate how three poverty traps – the insecurity trap, social discrimination, and poor working conditions – create and perpetuate chronic poverty. So, what policies can tackle such traps? And in what way do such policies assist chronically poor people?

Figure 1: Poverty traps and policy responses





## Tackling poverty traps

The **Chronic Poverty Report 2008-09** identifies five key policy responses that are able to tackle the five poverty traps (which include limited citizenship and spatial disadvantage, in addition to three traps outlined above). These policies do not map neatly (on a one-for-one basis) against the poverty traps. Rather, they create an integrated policy set that can attack the multiple and overlapping causes of chronic poverty (see Figure 1).

Priority goes to two policy areas – **social protection** and **public services for the hard to reach**. Alongside these are **anti-discrimination and gender empowerment, building individual and collective assets** and **strategic urbanisation and migration**. In this policy brief we focus just on the first of these policies – social protection – as our vignettes offer clear evidence of the effectiveness of this intervention. All five policy responses are detailed in the full report.

The **Chronic Poverty Report 2008-09** confirms and extends the conclusion of the 2004-05 Report: that social protection, and particularly social assistance, has a crucial role to play in reducing chronic poverty. Social protection tackles the **insecurity trap**, by protecting poor people from shocks, and reducing their extreme vulnerability. It helps them conserve and accumulate assets, so that they can improve their livelihoods and productivity. It contributes to transforming economic and social relations, in ways that strengthen longer-term livelihood prospects. For example, how much harder would **Bakyt** and his siblings have to work if their family didn't receive a small disability grant of just over \$10/month? And how would this affect their already limited schooling and meagre diet? This is not to say that social protection is a panacea. Most chronically poor households keep their head above water through relying on kin and social networks (which can mediate access to social grants), as well as assistance from the state and other actors.

**Maymana's** case is illustrative, and shows how the effects of social networks can be ambivalent. Some of Maymana's relatives, and her broader social networks, have proved crucial to her survival. When her husband was ill, males from their extended families helped arrange marriages for her

daughters. When she was destitute (not least due to her property-grabbing father-in-law), she was able to borrow food and money from her daughters, other relatives and neighbours. Moreover, family and community members contributed to her son's healthcare costs. When desperate, she was able to beg, and sometimes received gifts or charity. During Eid, the mosque committee provided the equivalent of five days' pay for her son, a sari and some meat.

These social networks have also facilitated access to formal transfers. In order to receive an old age pension, Maymana had to be registered with local government (as a widow who cannot work, living in poor housing). The fact that her relatives knew bureaucrats in local government almost certainly raised her visibility (there are more 'deserving' widows in the area than pensions).

However, over and above the loss of her land, Maymana's social networks have also worked against her in other ways. In late 1999, Maymana held a Vulnerable Group Development (VGD) card, entitling her to 30 kg wheat each month (World Food Programme grain provided to 'vulnerable' female-headed households). However, she received only 7.5 kg, and then had to return the card. The reasons for this were complicated, but were connected to her paternal cousin's affiliation to a political party (and that Maymana's house was in his compound). Micro-level political machinations meant that Maymana forfeited a well-targeted VGD card. This was a tragedy, as such an entitlement would have limited their slide into destitution.

### Box 1: Migration and domestic fluidity

**Vuyiswa's** life vividly illustrates how households in South Africa are frequently stretched: straddling rural and urban spheres, with fluid and porous boundaries. Household membership stayed identical in only five of the 48 households surveyed in 2002 and 2005. But whilst the composition of households change through time, the kinship and social networks in which the household is embedded mean that geographically dispersed individuals and households are intimately connected. For example, Vuyiswa's elder sister Thembeke and daughter Nomsa (neither of whom are included as household members), stay in her shack for extended periods, not least to take advantage of the economic opportunities and better health services offered in Cape Town. And over two decades ago Vuyiswa used her brother as a 'beach-head' to start her life in town. Just as there is a regular flow of people between households – such as children sent to school or to be looked after by relatives, or adults seeking employment or better health services – remittances flow from the urban to the rural sphere.

In Southern Africa, circular migration patterns established during apartheid (of unaccompanied male migration) have become more complex and multifaceted. But this is not to say that rural-urban financial links are less profound. In many ways rural locations are still the social and cultural centre of people's lives (and such locations are frequently viewed through a romantic lens of social harmony and a straightforward way of life). But migration to urban areas is often the only opportunity for accumulation. It is an activity which is nearly always reliant on rural kinship and social networks, and one which frequently leads to investment back into rural locations, whether in terms of livestock, the homestead, transport or a trading store.



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### The Chronic Poverty Research Centre

(CPRC) is an international partnership of universities, research institutes and NGOs, with the central aim of creating knowledge that contributes to both the speed and quality of poverty reduction, and a focus on assisting those who are trapped in poverty, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia.

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Despite the broad benefits from social protection, the Chronic Poverty Report 2008-09 highlights how initiating and sustaining social protection is ideologically, politically and institutionally challenging, not least due to elite concerns about dependence on such transfers.

Such concerns are often misplaced. Evidence from **Vuyiswa's** neighbourhood, (Khayelitsha, Cape Town) and Mount Frere, Eastern Cape, South Africa, shows how social protection grants do not lead to reliance and apathy but are used for productive purposes. Of 48 households that participated in qualitative interviews in these two locations, 40 were in receipt of a social grant (such as a pension allowance or child maintenance grant). Such grants allowed many of the households to secure access to basic food and domestic supplies. In 14 households, the receipt of the social grant allowed the recipient to undertake care work, thus becoming a vital link in the care chain, and freeing up relatives' time and energy.

Moreover, in ten households, social grants provided seed money or capital for economic activities (such as **Vuyiswa's** vegetable trading business). Grants were also invested in houses, children's health and education, and providing access to the formal labour market. The spatial distribution of these investments is of particular interest: they often occurred outside of the recipients 'core' household, and were made in consultation with, and with the cooperation of, networks of relatives. In this respect, the receipt of grants has a knock-on effect on care chains, and on the investment choices and livelihoods within spatially dispersed social networks (see Box 1). We can clearly see that social transfers are fungible, and because of this they would not reduce private remittances, but would divert such remittance flows to other nodes in social networks.

## Conclusion

Societies are mostly indifferent to the fate of chronically poor people. Their short lives are of little importance, no obituaries mark their passing. In life, they often face huge barriers and open hostility. As we have seen, **Bakyt's** mother's disability and grandmother's age and illness have wrenched him into premature adulthood, working 12-hour days in a coal mine and scavenging bricks from demolition sites. After her husband died, **Maymana's** father-in-law took her land, and the court in her Bangladeshi village took his side, not hers. **Vuyiswa** was driven out of the family compound in the Eastern Cape, and lost her job because she broke her leg. And **Angel** lost her home twice to the Zimbabwean army which sought to destroy democratic opposition in the informal settlements. These life stories show how chronically poor people are kept in their place, unable to benefit from the rights others enjoy, or to develop their own latent capabilities.

But through sharing their experience and knowledge with us, chronically poor people demonstrate that they are the leading actors in overcoming poverty. Most people in chronic poverty are striving and working to improve their livelihoods, and the prospects for their children, in complex and difficult circumstances. In telling us their story, they help us to think through possible policy responses. Their life stories can offer information about the efficacy of interventions and provide important information about how such policies should be designed and delivered. For example, on targeting, institutions, local-level politics and possible synergies between interventions. In this respect, the life stories of the chronically poor offers an important window for policy makers. They should be brought to the policy table much more frequently.

This policy brief was compiled by Martin Prowse

### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Shalish social system for informal adjudication of petty disputes both civil and criminal, by local notables.

### Further reading

This policy brief accompanies the **Chronic Poverty Report 2008-09: Escaping Poverty Traps**. It draws directly from the report, where full references can be found.

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This policy brief is based on the Chronic Poverty Report 2008-09: Escaping Poverty Traps. For further information about the report, please visit [www.chronicpoverty.org](http://www.chronicpoverty.org) or contact [cprc@manchester.ac.uk](mailto:cprc@manchester.ac.uk) for a printed copy.