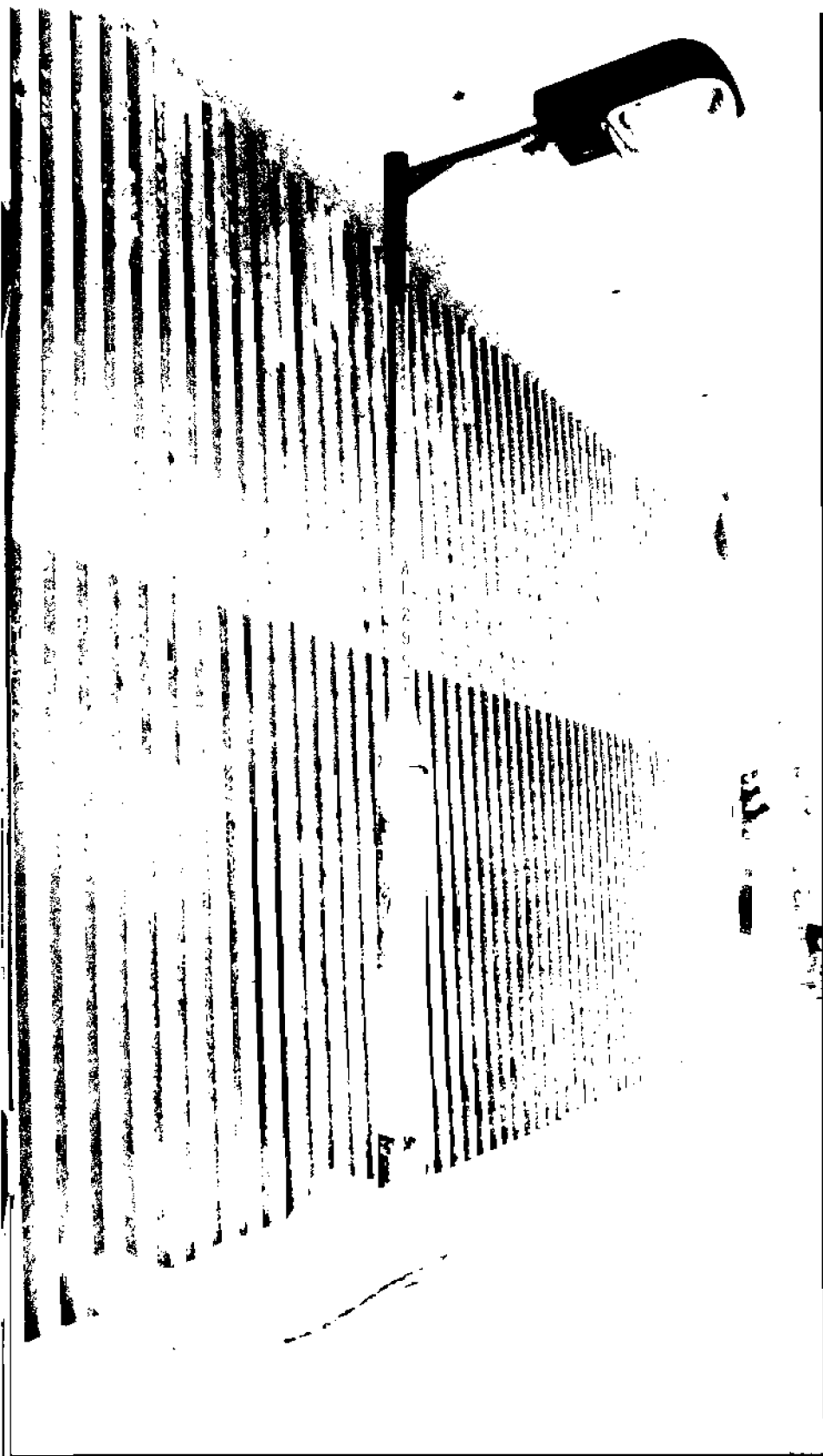


The VIEW

HAS CHANGED OVER THE PAST 30 YEARS?

Global trends may have changed
the public face of poverty,
writes John Sayer,
but the personal experience
remains unchanged.





For people living with poverty, it makes no difference whether the year is 2006 or 1976. When the family income cannot provide sufficient food, shelter, health and education, when you live under the threat of violence, from soldiers or from your husband, no time can be spent marveling at microelectronics or debating global political issues.

And yet poverty has changed. In the past 30 years, tens of millions of people have worked their way out of poverty and entire nations have moved from low to middle income. Other countries have suffered declines in life expectancy, income and health levels.

The VIEW

OXFAM HONG KONG DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMMES AT A GLANCE

- 1976 Volunteers set up Oxfam Group, Hong Kong, the precursor of Oxfam Hong Kong
- 1979 Projects and advocacy begin with Vietnamese Boat People in Hong Kong
- 1986 Support our first overseas project, in the Philippines
- 1987 Support first projects in China, Cambodia and Mozambique
- 1988 Support first projects in Vietnam
- 1992 Begin long-term work in Mainland China. Office opens in Kunming
- 1993 Begin long-term work in Bangladesh and India; Office opens in Hanoi
- 1994 Begin long-term work in Laos, Malawi and Sudan
- 1995 Office opens in Phnom Penh
- 1996 Begin long-term work in Hong Kong
- 2001 Begin long-term work in Burma, Indonesia and Timor-Leste; Office opens in Dili
- 2002 Support Joint Oxfam HIV/AIDS Programme in southern Africa
- 2003 Representative newly based in New Delhi, to coordinate South Asia programme
- 2004 Exploratory work for long-term projects in North Korea (DPRK); China Unit established; Cambodia project office becomes independent NGO
- 2005 Tsunami relief and reconstruction, with staff newly based in Sri Lanka
- 2006 Representatives newly based in Johannesburg and southern Philippines
- 2007 Programmes to be expanded throughout Mainland China; Establishment of programme team in Laos; Representative to be based in Jakarta

Some of the most impressive gains have been made in East Asia – first in Japan, Singapore, Hong Kong, South Korea and Taiwan, later followed by Malaysia, and eastern China. Different mixtures of economic and social policies created conditions for growth and for the benefits to have reached more than just a small elite.

The actual number of poor people has decreased: in 1981, according to the World Bank, some 1.45 billion people lived below the international poverty line, defined by the World Bank as less than USD1 per day, while in 2001, that number fell to 1.1 billion. At the same time, the proportion of poor people in developing countries has decreased from 28 per cent in 1990 to 19 per cent in 2002.

Yet, wealth distribution remains distorted, and the poorest sector remains the same: women

So, the glass is half full and half empty.

Looking back thirty years ago, the cold war dominated international relations. The West and the Soviet sphere supported governments which allied strategically with them. Many of these governments committed crimes, or sins of omission, against their populations: their actions condemned many of their people to poverty and rights abuses.

With the passing of the cold war and its underlying ideology, debates on development such as good governance, trade and investment policy, social investment and the role of civil society, began to be conducted in a more open way. Several Communist governments have introduced market reforms which have brought new levels of economic growth. Capitalist economies have introduced more comprehensive welfare systems and complex financial institutions to prevent economic and currency crises. Most people accept that it is a well-applied mixture of policies which will end absolute poverty in a nation; no single actor, action or ideology will solve the problem.

There are other positive trends. Today, more national leaders who committed unacceptable crimes against their people are being brought to justice in international courts. And while the trials themselves may be far from satisfactory, they serve to warn leaders everywhere that history does not provide immunity from crimes against humanity.

Developing countries are more assertive in many forums. Regional political groupings, such as the African

Union, are taking control of agendas for improved governance and better regional economic cooperation. At the World Trade Organization, developing countries are using strength in numbers: new blocs are rejecting the tactics of a minority of economically powerful nations which rig the rules of trade. Meanwhile, developed country governments are being pressured to contribute to ending world poverty through an intelligent application of policies on trade, investment, debt, aid, weapons sales, immigration, labour, environmental standards and corruption.

Globally, there is recognition that civil society – the self-organised efforts of people to voice their demands and contribute to social development outside of the formal political power structure – is an important part of an accountable and responsive social system. Oxfam can attest that many projects involving poor people in decision making and resource management, has brought many successes in improving people's lives. Villagers,

intellectuals and governments alike have seen models such as the micro-credit schemes of the Grameen Bank in Bangladesh place economic control and trust in the hands of people living in poverty. When people gain access to resources such as finance, product and market information, ideas on adding value in processing, fair access to markets (village, local, national, regional or global), or decent jobs, their lives can transform. Their poverty can end.

In 2006, we are armed with the capacity to put an end to poverty. The fact that 1,200 children continue to die from poverty every minute of each day that passes is more of a crime today than it was 30 years ago, for we now have a clearer view of their plight, and a clearer idea of exactly what should be done. Just like apartheid, or slavery, poverty can be

overcome and banished into history: all that is lacking is the mobilisation of those ideas and resources by our political and economic leaders; north, south, east, west.

It is every citizen's job to make it clear to our political leaders that we expect them to put action against poverty at the top of the agendas. We must also make it clear to business leaders that the social license to operate includes a commitment to carry out their core business in a pro-poor manner. If we act, and successfully demand action from our leaders, there is no doubt in Oxfam's mind that widespread poverty can end within our lifetime: over the next 30 years.