

Poverty, Social Exclusion and Welfare



'Absolute and relative poverty are unrelated and quite different phenomena.'
Discuss this statement with reference to the developed and developing countries.

This question takes us to the heart of this chapter. It asks you to consider the notion that conditions of relative poverty bear little if any relationship to conditions of absolute poverty. What the question suggests is that any general discussion of 'poverty' is misguided, given the very different social contexts around the world.

So how should you approach the question? Two options are possible. Note that you are not asked to agree or disagree with the statement and you could take this at face value, presenting a balanced discussion which does not arrive at a firm conclusion one way or the other. The second option is to argue against the proposition and use examples to demonstrate that absolute and relative poverty are, in fact, closely related. The 'debate' style – where a series of competing claims are weighed up using supporting evidence – is good training for a social science student. It allows more confident students to explore the ways that the central concept is contested, and to make important points about measurement and the comparability of poverty statistics. Whichever option you choose, your answer will need to cover some essentially similar ground.

You will need to define and discuss absolute and relative poverty and to do so using examples from a range of countries. Definitions of poverty can be found on pages 480-91 and it is worth noting that definitions are always tied in with attempts to measure the extent of poverty. Absolute poverty has long been associated with ideas of subsistence and 'basic human needs' and you will need to explore what such 'needs' might be. Are they universal, as they ought to be if they are 'human' needs? How do we measure whether basic needs are being met and are such measures legitimate? One popular measure, those living on less than US\$1 per day (p. 480), has become widely adopted in global comparisons though not everyone agrees. Better essays will draw on some of the material in Chapter 13 on global inequality, which fits in well here.

An issue to be discussed is whether absolute poverty still exists in the relatively rich societies where the material standard of life is so much higher, or is it limited today to developing countries? Does the chapter contain any evidence that absolute poverty persists in the developed countries? How widespread is absolute poverty across the developing countries? Addressing these questions will make for a more satisfactory answer.

The concept of relative poverty is now common currency in the developed world (p. 482). Relative poverty compares the living conditions of social groups to the average for that society, though various ways of doing this have been tried and you should discuss some of them. For example, Townsend saw poverty as deprivation and this kind of approach led to the idea of a 'poverty line' (pp. 482-3) based on the amount of income needed to lead the average lifestyle. As societies develop, the poverty line shifts accordingly and what constitutes relative poverty moves further away from the absolute poverty in poorer societies. Mack and Lansley (and Gordon) used a more subjective measure, asking people what *they* thought were the necessities for an acceptable standard of life (pp. 486-91). You could usefully compare some of these 'necessities' with those measures of subsistence adopted in definitions of absolute poverty in order to address the statement in the question.