YOUTH LIVELIHOODS AND POVERTY IN THE BEETHAM NEIGHBOURHOOD, EAST PORT OF SPAIN, TRINIDAD

Trix Janssen

Introduction

When discussing poverty and livelihoods in Trinidad, a segment of the population that cannot be omitted is the youth, a group that experiences comparatively high levels of vulnerability and risk. Young people have to deal with high levels of unemployment, violence and crime, a relatively high risk of contracting HIV/AIDS, widespread teenage parenthood, and low quality of the formal education system. In other words, youths have limited access to certain assets, vital in the securing of a livelihood, such as jobs and qualifications. These circumstances are precarious in the light of the importance of the adolescence period in realising independence from parents and making critical decisions influencing future well-being. The above challenges are not unique to young people, but this group is affected in a disproportionate manner, not only in Trinidad or the Caribbean but in general in the developing world, which leads the UNDP (2004) to state that poverty is gradually becoming a youth phenomenon.

To determine how young people deal with poverty and other adverse circumstances when securing their livelihoods, I conducted research in the poor urban neighbourhood of the Beetham Gardens, located east of the capital of Trinidad and Tobago, Port of Spain (Janssen 2004). This neighbourhood is commonly known as one of the most economically and socially deprived neighbourhoods in the country (Griffith 2002: 13). Fifty-eight (58) youths in the age range of 16 to 25 years old participated in the research, which was conducted between May and August 2003. Two areas in this neighbourhood were selected for the actual fieldwork; Phase 5, a squatter area, and the eastern part of Phase 4, commonly known as Hell Yard, which is dominated by government housing, but also contains a number of squatter dwellings.

This article seeks to answer the questions as to what poverty means for the livelihoods of young people living in the Beetham Gardens, and how they deal with this phenomenon. The framework along which I analysed the lives of the youths in the Beetham, the livelihood approach, is briefly discussed in the first section. Subsequently it is described how poverty interrelates with the opportunities and constraints of the youths with respect to their access to different resources or 'capitals', a vital concept in the livelihood approach elaborated on below. To illustrate the young people's views on their situation, the following section concerns their perceptions on their own poverty. The article is concluded by a final discussion concerning the impact of poverty on the livelihoods of the youthful population and their different strategies towards dealing with different aspects of it. To demonstrate how poverty can affect the lives of young people in poor urban areas, two interviews with respondents are presented in part in the Boxes 1 and 2.
Box 1 Esther, 23

I live with my brother. My parents well... my father he's alive, but we don't see him too often... sometimes we go look for him. He's living with someone, and he has children with that person... he never really lived with us long. And my mom she died five years ago with Aids. It's just me, my brother and my two sons. And we have a little brother, he is 13, he stays with my aunt. The father of my sons he don't live with us... he does give me some money for the children now and again.

I was working with Community Environmental Protection and Enhancement Programme (CEPEP) but the boss, he fired me because I was on sick leave and when I came back out to work, he told me that he had already hired two people in my place... that's just three weeks ago. My brother he's a cook out at the oil works, and he pays like the bills because he don't have any children to see about so he would pay the bill, and I would buy food... well both of us would put up and buy the foodstuffs.

I can't tell you much about the neighbourhood. I'm not a person... I don't come out much and stuff. I don't come outside and I don't lime.* With no one, I will just be inside... I find when you lime too much... they would say things about you and sometimes you will get a bad name. Certain people like to talk. I don't really talk to the people around a lot. I only come out to drop my son in school... when I was working I went to my work, now I'm inside most of the time.

My life is a mess right now because I don't have a job. I don't like to stay home, I like to be out there, working. It's hard to find a job these days, every year it becomes more difficult, and I don't know why. Sometimes when you go for a job and you can have all the qualifications, then you tell them that you from Beetham or Laventille and it's a no no. And I have my passes, you know, I have three passes. Because you're from Laventille and they hear things happening in Laventille and they give you a no. I applied for jobs already and I had to put my address on it... I'm not ashamed of my address, I put it on the thing... and then: no no.

* Liming takes place when two or more persons gather in an informal way with the chief purpose of socialising.
Livelihood Approach

In conventional thinking on poverty, being poor generally means lacking financial resources, most often considered to be caused by being unemployed or having low paid employment (Heltne 1990: 49). This stand is also held by scholars and policy makers who deal with absolute poverty lines, because these are based on income statistics. Chambers and Conway (1992) and Chambers (1995) among others, identified that the above view on poverty lacks the notion of the dynamics of moving in and out of poverty as well as complex and relative notions of vulnerability, diversity, powerlessness, isolation, exclusion, (in)security, seasonality and the influence of shocks and stresses, such as natural disasters.

In order to improve the examination and understanding of the realities of the poor, a framework has been developed that recognises the many components and dynamics of 'poverty' important for their livelihoods. This framework, the livelihood approach, which is used in this study to analyse the youths' situation, views the lives of people in terms of a number of different capitals to which a person can have a certain level of access, and that together make up the strategy people use to make a living (De Haan 2000: 15). Several authors have in the past classified, ranked, named, renamed and adapted previous classifications of these capitals. Having made a blend of the classifications by the authors Chambers and Conway (1992), De Haan (2000), Ellis (2000), Bebbington (1999), Moser (1998), Rakodi (2002), and Woolcock (2002), that is most suitable to the situation of poor urban youths in Trinidad, it can be concluded that there are five main resources or capitals persons can have access to in order to achieve a livelihood, which are called human, social, financial, physical and natural capital.¹

Vital in the livelihood approach is the notion of access, most adequately defined by De Haan (2000: 15) as the ability of people to use a capital in practice. Access is mediated and constrained by a variety of factors, such as personal characteristics (e.g. gender, age, ethnicity), assets of people e.g. individuals with a significant amount of savings (financial capital) or a university degree (human capital) - which generally enable access to other capitals - and personal choices (the decision to work instead of finishing one’s education can influence future earnings), as well as by the larger structure of the society in which people live (Bebbington 1999: 20-35; De Haan 2000: 24-25; Ellis 2000: 37-39). The latter overall structure is defined here as comprising the formal and informal norms and rules of society (institutions), the way markets work, the macro-economic situation, policies and projects by organisations (such as

¹ Human capital refers to labour, education, skills, experience, knowledge, creativity, inventiveness and health; social capital comprises networks, membership of groups, and the quality of relationships of trust and reciprocity between family and neighbours, as well as access to decision-making at different levels (the latter is also known as political capital). Financial capital entails savings, credit, remittances, social security allowances and pensions; physical capital refers to production equipment, tools and machinery, housing, land, livestock, food stocks (produce from land), jewellery and other physical possessions, as well as infrastructure such as transport, water supply, energy and communications; natural capital comprises environmental integrity and natural common pool resources such as (clean) air and water.
governments and NGOs), and trends, shocks and stresses (e.g. natural disasters).

Lacking access to capitals can be a cause as well as a symptom of poverty and the following describes how certain aspects of poverty interrelate with the opportunities and constraints for the youths under study with regard to their access to each capital separately.

How Poverty Impacts on the Youths’ Access to Different Resources

*Human Capital*

One of the findings of my study was that working for an income is the most important way for young people to secure a livelihood, and therefore the most vital asset for the youths under study is the human capital aspect of labour, which is exchanged for a monetary reward in many different ways. As shown in Table 1, 27.6% of the respondents claim to have permanent employment, of which the majority is low skilled permanent work, and thus low paid. Typical examples of this type of employment are construction work, work in restaurants, stores, carpentry workshops, car workshops, the food processing sector, and CEPEP. Just over a quarter of the youths (27.6%) make a living through the activity of ‘hustling’, which can mean many things in the context of poor urban areas in Trinidad, such as selling goods, recycling garbage at the La Basse dumpsite, manufacturing or repairing furniture, craft or appliances, gardening, providing services (such as plaiting hair, baby-sitting or running errands for other people), and any other irregular short-term or so-called ‘odd’ jobs. Criminal activities such as stealing or selling marijuana also fall in this category. The following quote illustrates the phenomenon of hustling:

I do all kind of things, I’m a all-rounder. I work construction, here and there... I don’t have a stable job. I do barbering, I fix electrical appliances when people ask me. Sometimes I go out there to buy things and sell over, you know. But that became a problem for us... when we on the streets, the police and them interfere with us, they want to give us case, they taking away our goods. But when the police keeps harassing us on the street and thing... it have some of we thinking: better we rob and you know... (Male, 22)

2 The word ‘permanent’ in ‘low skilled permanent work’ is used for classification purposes and might give this category of employment a too secure connotation. The aspect that makes the work permanent is that some form of written or oral agreement is involved. These contracts however do not seem to give employees many rights (they are aware of), since they report being fired very easily, and are apparently mainly intended to give the employer certain rights.

3 The Community Environment Protection and Enhancement Programme (CEPEP) provides as a governmental unemployment relief programme permanent employment to approximately 5,000 members of low income communities in the whole of Trinidad and Tobago.

4 One aspect that unites these different types of hustling activities is their high level of informality.
Table 1

Employment Status of Respondents (%)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Employment Status</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>High skilled permanent job</td>
<td>6.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low skilled permanent job</td>
<td>20.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hustler</td>
<td>27.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unemployed</td>
<td>31.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Full-time student</td>
<td>13.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A large portion of the respondents (31.0%) considers themselves unemployed. In practice however, it is hardly possible for people from low socio-economic backgrounds not to be working, because they have to have some sort of cash flowing merely to survive. Most of the unemployed therefore have one or more ways through which they do receive an income, although these activities are often neither full-time nor permanent, with the result that these persons consider themselves unemployed. Examples of these ‘alternative’ strategies to earn an income are preparing meals or snacks to sell in the neighbourhood, plaitsing hair, baby-sitting, painting, making crafts or small furniture, gambling, or assisting in a parlour, indeed activities that can also be defined as hustling. These practices are not an exclusive domain of the unemployed, since they are also performed by persons who are employed full-time to add to their often very low incomes, as well as by full-time students. It has to be noted here that many respondents tend to consider themselves unemployed, although they are working and have an income, which points to a discrepancy between the official government definition of unemployment and the youths’ definition. The government of Trinidad and Tobago (CSO 2003a: 14) considers the unemployed to be: “persons in the labour force who do not have jobs but are willing and able to work”. The youths in this study in general defined unemployment as not having a good, permanent, or official job. This difference in definitions would subdivide the category of ‘unemployed’ in Table 1 in two categories; one representing the youths who do not receive an income from any type of economic activity (12.1%), and the other, representing respondents who hustle on a more erratic and unstructured basis (18.9%), as compared to those classified as ‘hustlers’ in Table 1.

5 The national youth (15 – 24 years) unemployment rate for the year 2002 was 21.3% (CSO 2003b: 2), which points to a roughly 10% higher percentage among the youths under study and probably among youths in the poor urban areas in general.

6 According to the government, the labour force consists: “of the total population 15 years and over, all persons engaged in, or willing and able to be engaged in the production of economic goods and services” (CSO 2003a: 15). Furthermore, the government measures unemployment over a certain research period; when a person has worked for as little as one day in the week of the survey, he or she is not considered unemployed, whereas people might look at their general situation over a much larger time span when classifying their own employment status.

7 Only three of these seven youths reported to be housewives and therefore voluntarily not working, which actually puts the truly unemployed at a rate of 7.3% of the youths under study considered to be in the labour force.
The high rate of unemployment (and its inherent result of widespread hustling) among youths from urban lower socio-economic backgrounds, which is one of many causes of widespread poverty among the youthful population, appears to result first of all from their lack of qualifications, working experience and job seeking skills (Pantin 1997; World Bank 2000: 15), which will be further elaborated on below. Another factor is the stigmatisation and discrimination based on geographical area, age and ethnicity, identified by Pantin (1997) and CGCED (2002: 37), of which many respondents complain. Youths from poor urban areas, especially from the wider Laventille area are faced with many prejudices when on the hunt for a job, such as they would be lazy, not trustworthy, thieves and troublemakers, which is demonstrated by the following quote:

It’s more hard especially when you from the Beetham, because they think you thief them things, but how is somebody looking for a job going to thief? They think like: one bad apple spoil the whole bunch. You know like: one murderer in the Beetham, everybody a murderer. If it have one thief, everybody is thief. They think we is bad people and that’s why they fraud us. (Male, 19)

Furthermore their youthfulness and accompanying stigma of not being serious is also a reason for many employers not to hire these adolescents, as well as the fact that many of them are of African descent (the East Port of Spain area is predominantly inhabited by this ethnic group) and it is widely known that in many Caribbean countries a person’s chances to be hired increase, the lighter one’s complexion (Green 1995: 70; Pantin 1997). Another factor contributing to the high unemployment rate, found by Ryan (1997: 123) and supported by the findings of my study, is that in poorer socio-economic areas the link between having a permanent job and gaining respect in the social environment is not as strong as in other areas, which reduces motivation to look for employment. Moreover, a negative work ethic has been observed among segments of the youthful population in general in Trinidad and Tobago (Pantin 1997), as well as among some youths in this study, which is partly caused by the low return of the low skilled employment available to these youths (Ryan 1997: 122). Many of them do not see the merit in having a job when the accompanying salary is not substantially higher than the remunerations of hustling, which additionally entails the benefits of not having to report to a boss, and not having to “fill another man’s pockets” as stated by one of the respondents. Furthermore, the system of patronage on the job market, which leads to a necessity to ‘know people’, combined with a lack of contacts in the right positions among the youths who can help them obtain a permanent job, is also an important factor contributing to the high rate of unemployment. This phenomenon is explained by the following quote:

Unless I know somebody there, I can’t get nothing serious. But people who living around here, nobody has a good job, so how can we get to know somebody? (Male, 24)

The latter is not exclusively the case for low skilled persons but also for youths with a successfully finished secondary education, since the amount of people in their social environment with occupations suitable to their qualification level who could ‘link them up’ is even lower as compared to low skilled youths. On a macro-economic scale the high unemployment rates are also caused by the large amounts of low skilled youths entering the labour market (World Bank 2000: 15), as well as by the emphasis of the national economy on investment in capital
intensive instead of labour intensive projects (Moonilal 1999: 8-9).

For most respondents permanent employment is the ideal situation. However because many of them do not have access to this, they have no choice but to hustle (or even to resort to criminal activities, according to some youths) to make a living. As a result there have to be found ways of giving meaning and status to these alternative ways of making a living and the youths' lives in general. For this purpose, among other things, a subculture of the young urban underclass with differing values from mainstream society exists, serving as a value system that does grant status to making money in ways not (entirely) accepted by people outside ghetto areas, such as hustling on the dumpsite or trafficking drugs. The issue of the subculture will be elaborated on below.

Making money seems to be particularly important for the youths under study in the light of the high level of commoditisation of life in urban Trinidad and especially of the lives of youths in poor socio-economic areas, where life is even more commoditised. This high level of commoditisation is illustrated by the following quote:

You must have paper... without paper you can't bling. Especially if you like to look nice you know. God... anything you doing to look nice. If you working nowhere... anything... because you have to survive... it's the ghetto. It's serious in the ghetto you know. (Male, 18)

The above is a result of the homogenised youth culture in areas of music, fashion and lifestyle (mainly originated in the USA but with a strong influence from Jamaica) with its high level of materialism, which is adopted by many youths in (urban) Trinidad. The above finding of my study is confirmed by Hillaire (2000: 5) and by an article in the Express newspaper (2003). Another factor explaining the high level of commoditisation found in this study is the widespread activity of hustling which is, as mentioned before, a logical outcome of the difficulties in obtaining permanent employment, and which leads persons to be hesitant towards doing things for other people without receiving a monetary reward, which is also confirmed by Hillaire (2000: 6). Respondents reported that even 'going to the shop for somebody' or 'carrying something' were things they occasionally did for other people in exchange for money. Helping people build a fence or cleaning a yard were also services not considered free favours.

In poor socio-economic environments where money is such an important issue in order to gain status and where on the other hand it is so difficult to obtain, it is not surprising that alternative ways of making money to having a permanent job, are customary and accepted.

Regarding education, another vital aspect of human capital for tackling (future) poverty and possibly securing a more sustainable livelihood, I found that the young people's qualifications in general are not very high. Of the total population of respondents, 87.9% have formal primary schooling, while among the respondents who were outside the formal education system at the time of the research, 25.5% have completed formal secondary education, and 50.0% have completed a skills training course. Among the youths who did finish secondary school, the
mean amount of 'O' level passes obtained is 3.6, while none of the respondents reported to have 'A' level passes.

The general lack of qualifications and skills among urban youths from lower socio-economic backgrounds is caused in large part by the factors listed below. The results of my study confirmed the findings by the following authors, while the last factor is a finding of my study, not encountered in the literature.

- The low quality of primary schools accessible to children (in walking distance from their homes or in affordable travel distance, and not demanding a certain level of reading and writing skills upon entering) (World Bank 2000: 71).

- The low quality of secondary schools accessible to youths, leading to high drop-out rates and low literacy and numeracy skills (World Bank 2000: 73). Students from poor quality primary schools tend to have lower scores at the Common Entrance Exam at the end of their primary education, which limits their access to higher quality secondary schools. Those students who do manage to be placed in higher quality secondary schools often face higher transport costs due to the location of these schools, generally being at a further distance from their homes, causing many to drop out since these costs often cannot be met. (Moreover these transport costs are not always a priority for parents).

- For many youths the low relevance of the curriculum of the formal education system with its focus on academic skills, resulting in feelings of inferiority and low self-esteem among youths whose talents are more of a vocational nature, leading to, besides dropping out, anger and frustration expressed in violent and other forms of deviant behaviour (UN 1998: 62; Kutnick et al. 1997: 121; World Bank 2000: 14-15, 72).

- The competitiveness of the educational system requiring students to take additional private lessons in order to be able to compete with other students. The accompanying financial costs cannot be met by students from low-income families. In addition the rewards (status improvement) for schools with top performing students result in a bias in the focus of teachers on talented students and a reluctance to work in lower status schools (UN 1998; Pantin 1997: Kutnick et al. 1997).

- The costs of books, uniforms and transport accompanying school enrollment, which are problematic for many parents (World Bank 2000: 14), as illustrated by the following quote:

---

8 At the secondary level of education, there are two main types of final examinations: 'Ordinary' ('O' level) or CXC and Advanced ('A' level) or CAP. At the Ordinary level, a student must pass at least 5 subjects to receive what is considered a full certificate. It is very difficult to get a 'good' job with less than five 'O' level passes; this amount is hardly enough to find for instance basic clerical employment.
At some times we didn’t had everything to go to school and... You know not everyday and stuff like that, but my parents still make sure that we attend to school and still get a little education, we could still read a little and you know write your name still. I was getting a chance to sit common entrance and stuff like that and I end up going to a school in Arouca. But... it so happened that I didn’t end up going because how it was far distance and passage up and down... I didn’t end up finishing to really reach that standard... due to financial difficulties like at home, you know... (Male, 22)

- The sometimes not adequately stimulating home and neighbourhood environment (World Bank 2000: 8, 15).

- The lack of knowledge regarding the existing skills training courses (and sometimes the fees). It appears that youths often do not know where to go to register for certain courses, and what courses are offered. The small fees for SERVOU are too high for some youths, as well as additional costs such as uniforms and transport, as the following respondent explains:

There are enough programmes for youths, so that’s not the problem. But people don’t go there... maybe they never heard of them or they don’t know where to register. The MP for the area should come in here more and relate with the youths you know... motivate them, get them to do something, show them what they could do. Now, the youths often... they are not interested, but not really because they don’t want to really. It’s more... they should bring the programmes inside the neighbourhood instead of outside, because to pay the passage to go there is also a problem for many. (Male, 25)

Despite the above, the use made of skills training courses by the youths in this study can be called extensive, which is a way of trying to secure a future livelihood and dealing with poverty, diverging from the regular path of formal education.

**Financial Capital**

As mentioned before, the majority of young people in areas such as the Beetham neighbourhood have low paid jobs, low paid hustles or no regular employment at all. Because most of the money they earn is spent on basic needs, it is very difficult for them to save money, whether this is through a bank account, a credit union, a "sou sou" or otherwise. It was noted that when respondents do have some extra money, they rather spend it on fashionable consumer items, than save it, among other things because the former yields more status in their direct social environment than the latter. Because young people hardly have savings or possess other valuable assets, such as a house, it is

---

9 Service Volunteered for All (SERVOL) is a large local NGO that operates in the field of education, providing skills training courses, adolescent development programmes, teacher training, alternative secondary school education, pre-school education etc.

10 Member of Parliament.

11 Informal way of saving money, often among neighbours and/or family members.
difficult to access credit due to a lack of collateral, which is exacerbated by the phenomenon of stigmatisation of persons and especially youths from ghetto areas, as illustrated by the following quote:

When you go for a loan, with no job, no bank account, and you from the Beetham: they be watching you and want to know if you’re mad! (Male, 19)

For short-term cash needs of small size, some respondents reportedly borrow from friends, family or neighbours.

Access to social security allowances is also very low in the case of the respondents, because they fall outside of the main target groups for social services such as pensioners, the disabled and single mothers, and because the social security system in Trinidad and Tobago shows many loopholes. Access to remittances is slightly higher for the youths, as compared to the level of access to the other financial assets, because many of them have family living abroad. However this financial resource is erratic and is often directed to their parent(s), which does not benefit them but in a more limited way than if they receive it directly.

The aspects of financial capital of credit and savings, as well as social security allowances play a small role in the livelihoods of the respondents, which is mainly caused by the fact that they have limited access to it (and to a lesser extent are not interested in it). A reaction to the low level of access to credit form official institutions is the phenomenon of borrowing money from neighbours, friends and family. The personal benefit of remittances for young people is limited because they often do not receive them directly.

**Physical Capital**

Moser (1998:10) recognises the importance of the aspect of physical capital of housing for people's livelihoods in developing countries, when she explains that it is often used for shelter as well as for reproductive and productive purposes. All respondents have access to the asset of housing (and land in the form of the plot where the house is located) in one way or another. Table 2 shows the exact circumstances under which the respondents live with regard to

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 2. Housing Situation (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Squatter Housing</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Owner(s) of house</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family member(s)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Respondent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Respondent and partner</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family in law</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friend(s)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Private owner (respdnt. paying rent)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ex-partner</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total (n = 38)</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
ownership of the dwelling they occupy. Due to the divergent ownership situations the table is divided into two segments; one concerning the youths living in government housing, and the other concerning those in squatter housing.

Respondents and their families living in squatter housing theoretically face a lower degree of tenure security since they do not officially own\textsuperscript{12} the land their house is built on. However this is not experienced as such, which is shown by the fact that many owners of wooden houses have built over or are in the process of building over their dwelling, using concrete. The perceived tenure security is more important in this neighbourhood than the actual tenure security when deciding to invest in the improvement of housing. The respondents or their families living in government housing are not owners either. However, in general they are registered as the official renters of the dwelling, and when a family is living in a particular house for a long time, a sense of ownership is often felt. This feeling might also be strengthened by the phenomenon that many of the occupants of government housing do not in fact pay any rent.\textsuperscript{13} This is the case for the households of 40.0\% of respondents living in government housing.

In general access to government housing is lower as compared to squatter housing, since in the former case a person has to register with the National Housing Authority and usually be on a waiting list for a long time, since the dwellings do not change occupants often. Obtaining housing appears to be less of a problem in the squatter housing area, since persons feel comfortable clearing a piece of unoccupied land on which a house can subsequently be built (this building is considered the dweller's property). This is not to say that the youths living in squatter housing have a higher access to housing, because theoretically it is possible for people living in the government housing area to clear land and build a house in the squatter area as well. However, this seems not to be a regular practice since government housing youths are not accustomed to doing so.

Besides being the location of the youths' housing, the plot they are living on has other purposes as well. The yard is used in the case of 22.4\% of the respondents for the growing of fruits and/or vegetables, of which most is intended for personal consumption. A small minority of respondents or their household members sell these items, or prepare and then sell them. Furthermore some respondents (10.3\%) reported to rear poultry, which in all cases is intended for personal consumption. The above activities are much more common in the squatter housing area as compared to the government housing area due to the small size of the plots in the latter, which are almost totally

\textsuperscript{12} With regard to the process of squatted land regularisation, which is ongoing in certain areas across Trinidad and Tobago, some respondents report that they or their families are in the possession of a Certificate of Comfort (which is more or less a promise made by the government that occupants might be able to get deeds to the land in the future if the area proves to be suitable for upgrading, or that they are provided with alternative housing when this is not the case). However none of the squatters actually owned the land they are living on.

\textsuperscript{13} This might actually seem to be justified by the quality of government housing in Hell Yard, which houses four dwellings of very small size and hardly have a yard, and which are in an appalling state, especially when they are not invested in and renovated by the occupants.
occupied by buildings. On 8.6% of the plots the youths are living, a shop or parlour is located, and in 29.3% of the youths' households, at least one person produces something for commercial purposes such as prepared food, furniture, or craft items. Many youths also reported to be engaged in services taking place at their own house or plot such as baby-sitting, plaiting hair, or repairing things.

As to other vital aspects of physical capital, almost the entire population of respondents has access to a water supply into the own house or yard as well as to electricity, and the majority of households dispose of their excreta through a pit latrine. Access to other physical possessions differs and depends on the personal and household’s income level and the pooling or sharing mechanisms within households.

Despite the generally high access to the different aspects of physical capital, the quality of these aspects is often not high. This is the case for the quality of housing both in the squatter and the government housing area, as well as for the quality of water and electricity supplies, which are erratic and often tapped from neighbours, since it is difficult and expensive to acquire personal connections.

**Natural Capital**

A common phenomenon in developing countries reported by Evans (2002: 227) and Drakakis-Smith (1995: 669) is that poor urban communities are often situated in environmentally poor or even polluted areas, as opposed to higher income urban communities. Evans states that: “affluent communities do not live at the back walls of polluting factories; toxic wastes are not dumped in their backyards”. Residents of the Beetham Gardens do live at the back wall of an industrial rum brewing estate, causing them to be exposed to air pollution and disagreeable smells, and different types of solid (and toxic?) wastes are dumped in their backyard (on the opposite side of the highway where the La Basse dumpsite is located), causing the area to be covered frequently with smoke from burning garbage. Additionally the area is sandwiched between two major transport routes, the Beetham Highway and the Priority Bus Route, leading to a high level of vehicular air pollution.

Access to a clean natural environment is low for residents of the Beetham, resulting in many health complaints, such as asthma, from which 13.8% of youths under study reported to suffer.

**Social Capital**

In the literature a supportive home environment and stimulating, positive relationships with parents and other household members is often associated with upward mobility in general and with the development of personal and social skills in particular (see Furstenburg and Hughes 1995: 580-581; CGCED 2002: 32; World Bank 2000: 7-8). In majorities larger than 80%, respondents have positive opinions concerning the quality of relationships with parents and other household members. Equally large majorities report that they were encouraged and supported by their parents when going to school, and that mutual help and economic exchange in their households is extensive. Based on these data and the above theoretical propositions, it can be expected that the youths under study will have good if not excellent educational and employment careers. However, this is not the case, as illustrated above, which can for a large part be attributed to discrepancies between theorists’ definitions of positive, supportive and stimulating relationships and respondents’ definitions. The young people under study seem to be quick to define
relationships with their family members as ‘good’ when they are not exceptionally problematic or negative, while pedagogic experts might not consider them as adequately supportive. Furthermore, good relationships with parents and growing up in a caring home are not the only prerequisites for obtaining success in education and employment. Peer pressure, quality of education and financial constraints are only a few of many other influences on socio-economic mobility, playing important roles in the lives of youths living in poor urban areas.

It is also commonly believed in the literature (see for instance Woolcock 2002: 20; Furstenburg and Hughes 1995: 582), that people in communities with strong social networks, civic organisations, good quality relationships among neighbours, and high levels of mutual help are in a better position to confront poverty and vulnerability. People can rely on the support and assistance of others when they are part of such a system and civic association is often geared towards achieving certain development or empowerment goals, which is an expression of political capital or decision making power. Majorities of respondents report good or very good relationships with neighbours (62.1%), high levels of mutual help (72.4%), and a good or very good quality neighbourhood (74.1%). The typical characteristics of social capital among the young urban underclass, however, which is focused on social interaction in the form of informal gatherings (‘liming’) instead of social organisation geared towards achieving certain goals, point to a low level of political capital. Youths furthermore lack contacts with people holding powerful positions in companies or organisations, who might be able to assist them in finding employment. The optimism of respondents regarding the quality of relationships between neighbours and the quality of their neighbourhood, much in contradiction with the general opinion in the country, can most probably be attributed to the same reasons for their optimism regarding family and household relations.

To deal with the poverty and exclusion youths in the Beetham and in other poor urban areas experience a subculture of the young urban underclass with different norms and values from the mainstream society much as Wilson (1969) has described in his account of two different value systems in Caribbean societies, of which one is held by the dominant, mainstream society, and the other by those who are excluded from mainstream society and economy. The latter does not necessarily completely replace the former value system, it can also stretch, add on to, and deal in a flexible, pragmatic way with mainstream values and norms, as described by Rodman (1971: 193). In the case of the youths under study, this was expressed in the general ideal of a permanent job, and the accepted and sometimes even celebrated practices of criminal activities and hustling. The main phenomena found in this study and confirmed by the respective

14 It has to be mentioned that besides this general optimism, respondents identify many problems in their neighbourhood (such as unemployment, crime, drug abuse, lack of community spirit, and environmental pollution). However, these issues were dealt with separately in the survey and their mentioning seems not to contradict the above.
authors, that can be considered part of the subculture of the young urban underclass are:

- High incidence and relative degree of acceptance of crime (morality against the law) (Wilson 1969: 71-72, 80; CGCED 2002, 45).
- High incidence and relative degree of acceptance of 'bacchanal' (cursing, quarrelling, fighting, etc.).
- Importance of the form of social organisation called 'liming' (Wilson 1969: 80-81).
- Dependency syndrome (the government is often expected to provide the youths with jobs instead of looking for it themselves) (Ryan 1997: 136; Lee 1997: 85).
- Weak link between steady employment and respectability partly causing the popularity of hustling (Ryan 1997: 123).
- Extremely high degree of commoditisation (Hillaire 2000: 5; Trinidad Express 2003).

The presence of the subculture actually points to a high level of poverty since apparently there is an alternative system of values required to make the harsh socio-economic circum-
stances in the ghetto liveable. Furthermore the expressions of the subculture result in a lower esteem by the society at large of the quality of life in this type of neighbourhood. However, because of the presence of the subculture the youths can live relatively comfortable in their own socio-economic environment, allowing them to have positive opinions about their neighbourhood, their relations with neighbours and household members, and their general living conditions.

The Youths’ Perceptions on Poverty

Despite the general perception of the Beetham neighbourhood as being one of the most economically and socially deprived areas in Trinidad (Griffith 2002: 13), the majority of the respondents do not consider themselves poor, as is shown in Table 3, and a small minority even calls themselves ‘rich’.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Classification</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Very poor</td>
<td>8.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poor</td>
<td>36.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poor nor rich</td>
<td>49.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rich</td>
<td>5.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>100</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The latter group (5.3% of the research population) seems not to interpret the issue of wealth in a material way, demonstrated by the following quotes:

---

15 I have called the subculture observed in this study ‘the subculture of the young urban underclass’, since older residents seem to adhere to a larger extent to the values of the dominant society by trying to gain respectability through for instance permanent employment and legal marriage.
• Some people have riches, you know... in material sense then... but they don't have God in their life, I have God in my life, so I'm rich. (Male, 22)

• I have life, I could work and breathe and dance... so I'm rich. (Female, 21)

Most of the respondents who consider themselves neither ‘poor nor rich’, report that they are ‘doing ok’, or ‘just normal’, and they tend to compare themselves with people who are worse off, which the following quote demonstrates:

No, I’m not poor because I really believe that a poor person is somebody who really, who can’t really help themselves, and I take care of myself... I ain’t rich you know, I would call myself somewhere in between. I could do better... but it also have people living more miserable than me, in the streets and thing. (Male, 20)

Among the respondents who consider themselves ‘poor’ or ‘very poor’, majorities explain that this is the case because they are not employed or because they do not have all the things they would like to have. One respondent comments on his situation as follows:

I don’t have a cent, I can’t even buy a weed to smoke. No money for food... I ain’t eat for the day and really and truly I ain’t seeing no way to change that right now... I really don’t know where and when I gonna eat again. (Male, 17)

When the respondents are asked how they estimate the extent of the problem of poverty in the Beetham neighbourhood, 40.4% of them respond that they consider the problem ‘very big’, while 30.8% call it ‘big’. Among these youths, the most cited reason for the rampant poverty in their area is unemployment. Some respondents relate that poverty is caused by an unequal distribution of the nation’s wealth by the government. Expressions of poverty according to the youths under study are that residents of the Beetham are often unable to buy food, and that they do not have certain goods the respondents associate with being not poor such as a fridge, a television, a car, etcetera.

Approximately a quarter (26.9%) of the respondents consider the problem of poverty ‘normal’, mostly because they estimate the level of poverty in the Beetham not to be worse than or equal to other places. When asked what other places the respondents refer to, mostly neighbourhoods within the greater Laventille area are mentioned such as Morvant, St. Barbs, John John and Laventee. Youths who mention that there are neighbourhoods worse off than theirs, tend to mention Sea Lots.

One of the 3.8% of respondents who calls poverty a ‘small’ problem, relates that:

Poverty... it’s something that’s up to you. If you don’t do nothing like look for a job or a hustle, you will be poor. (Female, 23)

Another respondent mentions that poverty is not a large problem in the Beetham because:

People in the Beetham could always get cheap or free thing, because factories put their rests and thing in the La Basse; cigarettes, condensed milk, Carib in cans, pampers... food, everything... and everything still good to go. (Female, 18)

The above figures illustrate that the youths seem to view their personal situation more positive (less poor) than they view the situation of others or that of the neighbourhood in general. This is demonstrated by the fact that almost half
of the respondents (49.1%) call themselves ‘poor nor rich’, while a large majority (71.2%) calls poverty a ‘big’ or ‘very big’ problem in their area. This selective positivism can be seen as a coping mechanism to deal with the harsh circumstances of living in poverty.

Box 2 Joshua, 17

This place is like hard to get work and thing. It have the Ten Days and the programmes and thing... that's how people get a little earn, how people make a living. Sometimes they can get a little work on the side. It have some people go over in the La Basse and hustle. That's how some of them go make their money and thing. It have those who selling weed. It have plenty people here who smoke because they so frustrated... because they can handle their problems better if they smoke. I find they should legalise it, because it ain't stopping them and it ain't harmful.

People here, we have to work for real small money, even if people have child to feed and all kind of thing. And the kind of work you getting, you know like construction work... they ain't giving a fella no other kind of work. And that's a kind of hard work to kill out yourself and all kind of thing. And it have real easy work out there... fellas realising to kidnap somebody, they getting real money for that. It have some of them robbing maxi's and thing. You could call it crime... but them fellas feel they have to, we are trying to survive. People hungry when the day come. It have a man who have a newborn baby, and he have nothing to give it, he have no other choice than to rob because he has no job and he need fast money. It go be hard you know. Myself, I did my bad things, but nothing really serious, but I have some of my friends... but they have to survive..., I know that too.

The neighbourhood is a cool scene here. People living normal. It have plenty other places you know, I think here is much better to other places. I hear people saying that down here be bad and thing. Down here never bad, down here just cool. People just have to know what's their scene. You cannot disrespect a man, cause the man go disrespect you. When a man disrespect somebody, it can cause a fight, causing a small war, into a big war.

Right now... well, I ain't really doing anything... I'd be working off and on and thing. Like if somebody has a businessplace to clean out and thing, I go handle it. And carpentry things. But right now... whole day I just liming outside. It don't have enough thing for me to do now, so I just be outside letting my life pass by. It's real judgement...

I ain't really get to go to school, well I went primary school but, you know well... when you growing up now, you know your mind go be frustrated too like... your mother gone, your father gone in prison, and you know, I ain't grow up with mother and father together... I grow up with my aunt, and she has five of her own, so you know, I would always be the last one to... get thing. And my father, he had real plenty children, he end up dying now... My father had real plenty children, it have some of them I don't even self know.

And you know when you're small... you will have schoolfriends who go be miserable too... so you will be influenced. And your mother will ask you: what's your aim in life and... that school is important and thing. But at that time, you don't be studying school too, you just on your own
scene, braking rules, not going to school, go lime somewhere. But it don’t really matter when you look at it, even if you finish school, it still hard to find a job.

So I end up learning a trade, carpentry. And now you know. I just look for a little work and thing. Carry in a little money because... it’s all about the money, you have to survive down here. Comfort is what people need, and they ain’t getting no comfort... the government alone liking themselves and the youths and them suffering. And the youths... their family make way for them when they was young... so now them family get old and them coming up now, bearing a pressure... you know, providing. But the government have all the money, and with that money they only making more money... and not helping where they should help... the poor people.

For the future, I want to have a nice little permanent job. I like a government job. Two children, a wife... and a house you know... in the countryside, I like the countryside, somewhere up Matelot side... A big home, at the sea or a river... plenty trees with fruits and my own vegetables. And I want to get a little car then.

**Conclusion**

Poverty is so intertwined with people’s lives and livelihoods in areas such as the Beetham Gardens, that it is difficult to say whether certain phenomena are causes or results of poverty, and often they are both. A cause of poverty is unemployment, because it leads for instance to a lack of, low or unsustainable income. However unemployment is also a result of poverty because growing up in a poor urban socio-economic environment often means getting an education of low quality resulting in low qualifications, leading to difficulties when looking for a job, and often to unemployment.

As mentioned before, poverty is a phenomenon with much more connotations than only lacking money. In the case of young people in the Beetham neighbourhood it entails such diverse aspects as not having steady employment, having low paid employment, having a low level of qualifications, not having all the basic needs at all times, stigmatisation, having a low access to credit and savings, having a low self-esteem, lacking adequate role models, living in a poor, socially stressed neighbourhood, coming from a poor family, lacking valuable contacts in the right places, lacking decision-making power, living in poor quality housing, lacking space to grow vegetables, fruits and rear poultry, not having certain desired consumer items, and lacking a healthy natural environment, among other things.

As to the different aspects of poverty, young people in the Beetham Gardens have different reactions to them and different ways to deal with them. An example of a reaction to the low quality of formal education the respondents receive is to rely more on skills training programmes, often provided by NGOs, in order to generate qualifications. A reaction to the difficulties in obtaining permanent employment is to resort to hustling to gain an income, or even to illegal activities. As an answer to the low remuneration when the youths do have employment, they earn some extra money with hustling practices alongside their full-time jobs. Growing fruits and vegetables and rearing poultry are reactions to the difficulties with purchasing food items on a regular basis when having no or a low salary.
Reacting to the inability in acquiring certain consumer items, some adolescents decide to obtain them illegally. To deal with the stigmatisation, the low self-esteem, as well as with the difficulties in getting ahead socio-economically in the dominant society, a subculture of the young urban underclass has been formed through which status, respect and self-esteem can be gained in other ways than the conventional ones such as having a permanent job. Another way to deal with adverse circumstances in general is to smoke marijuana or even cocaine, which make realities seem less harsh and a more positive view on life temporarily prevails.

Unfortunately some of the ways young people use to deal with certain aspects of poverty are not very sustainable, such as drug abuse or criminal activities, which can lead for instance to imprisonment or even death. Others are more valuable for the youths' livelihoods and (future) well-being such as obtaining qualifications through skills training courses, or using different economic activities to gain an income. The latter strategy often displays a high level of creativity and inventiveness, generates different skills that enlarge the youths' employability, and reduces risks when one of the income sources dries up.

There is an enormous diversity in the livelihoods of youths living in the Beetham, which causes generalisation to be difficult and risky. One aspect that is shared by most respondents, however, is that they experience some degree of difficulty with making a living, inherently interrelated with the phenomenon of poverty. However they all seem to succeed in securing a livelihood in one way or another.

I hope it is demonstrated by this article that it is important for a government who desires to tackle urgent social problems often blamed on 'the youths' such as widespread unemployment, crime, violence, and drug abuse to use an integrative approach when analysing these issues, which looks at the deeper causes of the problems such as poverty, inequality, the failing education system, and the historical, social, political and value systems both in mainstream society as well as in different subcultures.
References


