

Kim Samuel
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A Poverty of Belonging:
Why Advancing Global Development Depends on Combatting Social Isolation

Thank you Max, for that kind introduction. Thank you, George and Kimberley, for the honour of being with you on this panel.

And thanks to everyone for being here, and for sharing in this conversation. In a time that George has powerfully described as an age of loneliness, where debates so often revolve around building walls instead of bridges, just the act of coming together in this beautiful space is a powerful statement of hope.

I'd like to open by reading a few stanzas from a poem by the late Kathleen Raine, with whom I developed a wonderful friendship in the last year of her life. The poem is called “Confessions”:

Wanting to know all
I overlooked each particle
Containing the whole
Unknowable.

[...]

And lifelong have been reading
Book after book, searching
For wisdom, but bringing
Only my own understanding.

[...]

Being what I am
What could I do but wrong?
Yet love can bring
To heart healing
To chaos meaning.

Kathleen often used to talk of the importance of “wording the world.” And as I reflect on the last lines of her poem, and how love can bring meaning to chaos, it seems to me that one of the areas where we need to word the world is in the language of belonging and social connectedness.

In academic terms, social isolation can be defined as the deprivation of social connectedness.

But, beyond definitions, what matters most is how isolation is *experienced*—which I describe as the feeling of sitting alone at the bottom of a well.

The isolated person feels trapped and alone, outside all circles of concern, suffering, invisible in a dark, cold place, where no one loves them and no one cares.

In my work and my scholarship, my mission is to help people find pathways from isolation to connectedness and belonging. To help them rise from the bottom of the well and step into the light.

That was the goal that brought me to Oxford in 2013, as a visiting scholar at the Oxford Poverty and Human Development Initiative (OPHI) — one of the world’s leading centers for the study of multidimensional poverty.

Almost 20 years ago, the World Bank’s groundbreaking study Voices of the Poor helped make clear that living in poverty means much more than not having enough money. As one participant put it,

“Poverty is pain; it feels like a disease. It attacks a person not only materially but also morally. It eats away one’s dignity and drives one into total despair.”ⁱ

At Oxford, I had the opportunity, working with OPHI, to make the case that social isolation, or relational deprivation, is an important dimension of poverty and can be both a consequence of living in poverty and a cause of its persistence.

I’ve seen how social isolation, and its cousins stigma and shame, can hamper growth, development, and progress. And I believe that if we are to achieve the long-term social and economic development we seek, we need to apply the lens of isolation and connectedness to policymaking at every level.

Let me note at the outset that social isolation is not the same as being alone. People can choose solitude. But social isolation is a condition, not a choice.

Likewise, social isolation is not simply a function of geography. Living in a remote location does not preordain isolation, though at times it can compound it. And living in a city, amidst millions of others, is not enough to safeguard an individual from feeling overlooked or undervalued.

But whatever a person’s background, isolation hurts—physically and psychologically. Humans are social creatures—and, when our bonds of belonging are severed, we feel painfully and perilously adrift.

This was confirmed by the stories of men and women I met in my field research, when I traveled with OPHI to South Africa and Mozambique to better understand the lived experience of people in poverty.

Over and over, they told me how highly they valued social connection. People ranked relationships with others among the five most important things in their lives—alongside food, shelter, education, and work.

Connectedness is literally life-sustaining.

Yet, for some people, living in poverty made those relationships harder to develop or keep. As one woman put it, “Poverty means being lonely...and not being able to get other things because you are lonely.” In other words, she felt isolated because she was poor, and poor because she was isolated.

This gets to the second key theme people shared, which is the burden of stigma and shame.

Being poor can make people feel like they are “less-than”: less significant, less valued, less human. And whether they are excluded by others, or feel compelled to withdraw on their own, the result is a downward spiral that is difficult to reverse.

One person in South Africa told us, “Most of the people who get HIV are the most poor people, so we tend to say they were using their bodies to get food and money...so the stigma is there...that’s why some people are not able to tell anyone they have HIV, and they end up dying because they can’t ask for help because they are ashamed.”

Another who was speaking about his neighbors, explained, “Even if you are hungry...you can’t go to them to ask for food or money, because they are judging you that you are poor...they won’t give you money...so it’s better that you isolate yourself.”

Hearing these stories helps make clear why breaking the cycle of poverty isn’t as simple as building a health clinic, or providing access to free food. Assistance programmes are prone to failure if social bonds are frayed.

But what if we changed the paradigm? What if we put social connectedness at the heart of our policymaking and programme development?

The timing is ripe, especially against the backdrop of the Sustainable Development Goals. The SDGs, which were adopted in 2015, envision a world where no one gets overlooked or left behind.

So let me offer three core elements I see as essential to building a social connectedness policy framework.

1. Processes grounded in Mutual Respect to enable a focus on assets

First, policy-makers and researchers must strive to build processes grounded in mutual respect. Processes that begin with active listening and processes that seek common ground.

The point of doing this isn’t just to recognize shared vulnerability. Nor is it simply to sympathize

with those in pain or suffering. Rather, this approach becomes a way to focus not on apparent gaps or deficits but rather to identify strengths within the community first.

This type of process challenges us to see different points of view and to collectively strategize about how to build on assets in order to support and enhance them as a key entry point to building sustainable, social connectedness policy solutions.

2. Embracing Reciprocity and bringing a holistic view of Community

Second, we must recognize the critical value of reciprocity. Connectedness is a two-way street. When we extend a hand to others, we are touched, as well.

This approach leads to policy solutions and interventions that strive not to simply address one sector or one group but rather solutions that recognize the importance of creating and reinforcing linkages generating multiple benefits in a holistic view of the community.

3. Achieving Equity and Community Capacity

Finally, social connectedness is more than removing barriers and creating access. It requires a proactive approach and investment.

As we think about how to bring connectedness and compassion into the policymaking arena, it isn't just about making sure that marginalized groups get a seat at the table; it's about ensuring that everyone at the table can be a full and equal participant.

Instead of imposing top-down solutions, we need to cultivate solutions from the bottom-up. Instead of leading from the front, policymakers must get behind the priorities communities identify for themselves. Because, overcoming social isolation is always done *with* and not *for*.

Amartya Sen has argued that "Poverty is...not having the capability to realize one's full potential as a human being." Efforts to combat poverty should focus on empowering individuals and communities with the agency to uplift themselves.

And in my experience, even the most impoverished or disadvantaged communities have meaningful assets upon which to draw... including Indigenous or traditional knowledge that can be harnessed to great effect.

Consider, for example, the African concept of Ubuntu—which means that we become who we are through our relationships with others: "I am because you are."

This notion that connectedness is integral to wellbeing can inspire interventions to build community—generating hope and creating opportunities for positive, culturally relevant social support.

No one need feel excluded from such a project, because everyone has something to give. It recalls the wisdom of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.: “Everybody can be great, because everybody can serve.”

The final point I want to make is the importance of reducing social isolation among young people. Because, when we think about entry points to disrupt generational poverty, helping children develop their own agency is key.

A great example of all these principles in action can be found at the Othandweni Family Care Centre in Soweto, Johannesburg.

Roughly 90 young children live at the Centre—boys and girls from newborn to age seven who have been orphaned, abused, or neglected by their families.

As one social worker put it, when children first arrive at the home, sometimes they “have experienced such social disconnect that upon your first interaction with the child they are withdrawn, sad, blank, and unemotional.” The Centre aims to help them heal by providing a safe and loving environment, in part through the innovative Gogo (Grannies) programme, which was established in 2011.

The Gogos are local women who’ve been recruited and trained to volunteer at the Centre, two hours a day, five days a week. I should say that “Grannies” is a relative term; the women are typically between 45 and 60 years old. Each one is paired with two children with whom she works over a period of years. And through their relationship, the children open up. They learn to trust. They grow and flourish.

Yet, one of the most wonderful aspects of the programme is that the benefits go both ways. The Gogos become deeply attached to the children; one of them told me that when she’s home on the weekends, she misses her children terribly.

Just as significant, the Gogos develop an empowering sense of purpose and self-confidence, and the bonding they share with one another creates a meaningful network and support group.

In the words of one caregiver, “For me it has opened my self-esteem more. I was starting to lose focus and balance. But since I was this granny... I don’t want anybody to feel any pain. It seems as if...everybody could stay on my shoulders...”ⁱⁱ

Making a difference in the life of a child has transformed her life as well. The reciprocal rewards of building belonging strengthen everyone involved.

I have a number of other wonderful examples I can share in our discussion... such as City Year, which works with youth service leaders in South Africa... or SHOFCO, a homegrown community empowerment initiative launched in Kibera slum in Nairobi, Kenya, which combats poverty by linking schools for girls to social services for everyone.

But let me close here on a more spiritual note, in keeping with the setting of All Souls.

To me, success in breaking the shackles of exclusion that hold so many people back will depend not only on smarter policy... not simply on more thoughtful programmes... but on our willingness to embrace what I call the Holy Grail of Compassion:

- Accepting and nurturing ourselves as we are.
- Accepting and nurturing those who are different from us.
- Cultivating connectedness with everyone in the community, and knowing that everyone in the community has a purpose.
- And, respecting that as members of a community, we have a sacred responsibility to hold everyone's life in high regard.

That is how we can heal, enlighten, illuminate and expand our shared existence... and spread the love that, to build on Kathleen Raine's words, can bring to heart healing, to chaos meaning, and to an age of loneliness—belonging.

Thank you very much for listening.

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ⁱ <http://siteresources.worldbank.org/INTPOVERTY/Resources/335642-1124115102975/1555199-1124115187705/vol1.pdf>

ⁱⁱ <http://www.socialconnectedness.org/in-conversation-with-the-othandweni-grannies/>