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# Peter Townsend: The paradigm shift in poverty research

A tribute by Professor Dave Gordon

Professor Peter Townsend was the greatest social scientist of the 20th Century. He made seminal contributions to the study of inequalities in health, disability, social care of the elderly, human rights, domestic and international social policy.

He is, however, best known for his lifelong work which revolutionised both the theory and practice of poverty research.

**“Peter Townsend did not only create new knowledge – he then acted upon it. He did not just understand the world – he changed it.”**

## Professor Dave Gordon

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In the early 1950s, most academics and politicians believed that poverty should be defined and measured in terms of people’s minimum needs for physical subsistence and that it had effectively been eradicated in the UK by the Welfare State. In 1965, Peter Townsend and Brian Abel-Smith produced *The Poor and the Poorest*, empirical analyses of recent Family Expenditure Surveys which proved that poverty remained persistent and widespread.

Townsend argued conclusively that no ‘absolute’ definition of poverty, related to either subsistence or basic needs, was scientifically valid. Poverty could only be objectively and scientifically defined and measured using his ‘Theory of Relative Deprivation’: *“Individuals, families and groups in the population can be said to be in poverty when they lack the resources to obtain the types of diet, participate in the activities and have the living conditions and amenities*

which are customary, or at least widely encouraged or approved, in the society to which they belong" (Poverty in the United Kingdom, 1979).

He believed subsistence and basic needs definitions of poverty to be inadequate as they failed to acknowledge people's social roles and obligations. In all societies, people require resources to mark births, deaths and to give presents on special occasions such as birthdays and marriage and on religious festivals. These social obligations are as important and sometimes more important than people's physical and material needs. Parents will sometimes go hungry or without heating in order to be able to buy their child a birthday present.

Townsend showed that: *"poverty is a dynamic, not a static concept...Our general theory, then, should be that individuals and families whose resources over time fall seriously short of the resources commanded by the average individual or family in the community in which they live . . . are in poverty."* His methodological research, particularly the Poverty in the UK survey, invented the measurement of poverty through combining indicators of resources and deprivation in order to identify a scientifically valid poverty line.

Townsend's empirical work showed that poverty was a pervasive structural phenomenon rather than due to the fecklessness or 'bad' behaviours of the 'poor'. Targeting regeneration interventions at the poorest housing estates could never effectively eradicate poverty; profound changes were required to the structures in society which caused poverty.

Townsend argued that the causes of poverty could only be adequately understood in relation to the power and privilege of the 'rich'. Internationally, this required knowledge about the structures of

society which served the interests and maintained the power of both national and international elites and transnational corporations. Poverty could only be effectively eradicated if some power and resources were redistributed from the 'rich' to the 'poor'. Townsend criticised academics, successive Labour Governments and UN organisations for failing to engage with this 'problem of riches'. He quoted fellow Fabian, RH Tawney, approvingly:

*"Nothing could be more remote from Socialist ideals than the competitive scramble of a society which pays lip service to equality, but too often means by it merely equal opportunities of becoming unequal." He warns against "the corrupting influence of a false standard of values, which perverts, not only in education, but wide tracts of thought and life. It is this demon – the idolatry of money and success – with whom, not in one sphere alone but in all, including our own hearts and minds, Socialists have to grapple."*

Peter Townsend did not only create new knowledge – he then acted upon it. He did not just understand the world – he changed it. He helped to found both the Child Poverty Action Group (CPAG) and the Disability Alliance, organisations whose advocacy and campaigning work have helped improve thousands of lives. Peter also worked effectively with politicians and policy makers, such as UNICEF and the International Labour Organisation (ILO), to improve the human rights of poor adults and children, including campaigning for a global child benefit, as a means to reduce poverty.

UNICEF acknowledged the debt they owed to him with the following tribute: *"Peter Townsend will be missed by UNICEF, but even more by the millions of poor children around the world, who never heard his voice,*

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*but whom he never forgot either in his research or in his advocacy, nor, most importantly, in his heart. Yet his voice will echo beyond his lifetime, and continue to influence efforts to end child poverty, in the rich and the poor world."*

Peter Townsend's final lecture, was an e-lecture on Social Policy and Poverty to South African MSc students. Unfortunately, they did not have time to thank Peter before he died. The students have now sent a short and poignant farewell:

*Hamba Kahle – "Go well" Champion of the Poor.*

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