# Interwoven Struggles: Navigating Life in Urban Poverty and Understanding its Academic Complexity

Ramirez Chaparro, Maria Nathalia and Chacón Mejía, Catalina

UNU-MERIT Maastricht, Universidad Santo Tomas Bucaramanga

2024

*María Nathalia Ramírez Ch
Catalina Chacón Mejia*

Interwoven Struggles: Navigating Life in Urban Poverty and Understanding its
Academic Complexity

*"Cancer is a strange thing. Poverty is no less strange" (Amartya Sen based on a poem by J.B.S
Haldane).*

While poverty is a common term in the collective imagination, its meaning varies depending
on who defines it. Nowadays, considering it as something exceptional would be questionable,
as it is present daily for many, forming part of their everyday reality, whether experienced
personally or perceived from the outside. Despite this omnipresence, the solutions that would
significantly reduce or eradicate poverty remain elusive.

From my perspective, the complexity of poverty reflects the complexity of the lives of those
who experience it. Understanding it goes beyond simple concepts or reductionist
measurements; it requires an approach that encompasses its intrinsic complexity. Over time,
poverty has been studied by various disciplines, and its definition varies according to society
and the approach given to it. However, it has predominantly been understood linearly,
determining who is poor according to certain criteria that ultimately perpetuate inequality
in society. Following that same logic, we could think that individuals are generally reduced
to being a small part of the system's machinery, and they are reduced to an object that
requires maintenance through economic or in-kind transfers to survive. Now, when more
effects are considered apart from the economic ones, and the nature of the human beings
such as their dignity and freedom are seen, considering them poor based on economic
standards again results in objectification – translated into being just another number – a
reason to think again about poverty as a complex and interdisciplinary phenomenon.

Returning to poverty as a complex phenomenon, Sen [1] reflected well on how it learns and
adapts, besides being a constant chaos resulting from market failures and system instabilities.
Moreover, it is not in balance and its medium is capital, which is scarce for many in poverty
conditions, and therefore adaptations manifest, akin to innovation in favor of *over-living*, as
if it were a dissipative structure [2]. This once again leads us to reflect on the linear vision
of poverty under the predominance of seeking economic balance, reflected in the way social
programs are allocated. In the long run, they end up understanding it as a sequential
phenomenon where the solution is applied everywhere as if they were - homogeneous
processes and contexts [3]. Therefore, my question remains very much in line with Bourdieu
[4] on how to understand the world if it is neither pure nor perfect, and under what logic the
consequences of such disorder can be foreseen?

Considering the debate in the previous lines, I would be interested in addressing urban
poverty, which is well known to be pervasive and affects millions of people worldwide. In
cities, poverty manifests in various forms, including inadequate housing, lack of access to
basic services, unemployment, and social exclusion. Despite economic growth and urban

development, many cities continue to struggle with high levels of poverty, which undermines social cohesion, economic productivity, and sustainable development. Given this panorama, I believe it would be worthwhile to see how to understand from the perspective of the system of cities the complexity I have been talking about regarding poverty. Viewing cities as "systems," with interconnected, highly political, and complex ways of working, could shed new light on how all this connects with the various ways of being/living in poverty.

For this reason, I believe that this relationship - city systems, complexity, and even coevolution - with poverty deserves further exploration. In the sense that indeed, cities are not isolated entities but rather interconnected within broader systems. These systems can be regional, national, or even global in scale. Cities within a system often interact with each other through trade, migration, knowledge exchange, and other forms of connectivity. But also, cities are complex systems characterized by numerous interconnected components and feedback loops [5]. So I believe that complexity theory might help in understanding the emergent properties of urban systems, such as self-organization, resilience, and adaptability. But also, as poverty is not only a complex but a multidimensional phenomenon, it would manifest in different forms. Viewing this relationship could be understood from spatial inequality, economic dynamics, social networks, and institutions and feedback loops, which is normally understood in how poverty influences urban development patterns, and vice versa. For example, concentrated poverty in certain neighborhoods may deter investment and perpetuate cycles of deprivation, leading to further marginalization of residents. However, this warrants further research, monitoring, and interdisciplinarity.

Moreover, urban poverty ultimately becomes a systemic problem because, as mentioned earlier, it encompasses a spectrum of socio-economic challenges faced by residents of cities. Additionally, despite urbanization and economic development, many cities continue to struggle with high levels of poverty, perpetuating cycles of deprivation and inequality. Just because this falls short of being the solution to so many intertwined systems and lives. Although if some reasons need to be given, we should reflect on the economic transformation, driven by globalization and technological advancements, which has exacerbated urban poverty by creating winners and losers, resulting in job losses, wage stagnation, and precarious employment, widening income disparities, and exacerbating economic insecurity [6]. And also, spatial segregation further perpetuates urban poverty, as marginalized communities often face inadequate infrastructure, substandard housing, and limited access to quality education and healthcare, with gentrification and urban renewal projects exacerbating spatial disparities and eroding social cohesion by displacing low-income residents [7]. Additionally, inadequate social safety nets, characterized by weak social welfare systems and insufficient support services, fail to address the complex needs of urban residents living in poverty, contributing to cycles of deprivation and intergenerational poverty, particularly among vulnerable populations, due to limited access to affordable healthcare, childcare, education, and social assistance [8].

All of the above resonates with what was initially said; this requires a holistic approach that addresses the complex interplay of factors within urban systems, but also economic systems. Returning to the complexity of poverty, it remains necessary to question whether economic

systems, social structures, and public policies are primarily responsible for generating it by limiting individual opportunities to escape this situation, or if social structures have remained stable due to economic dominance and the lack of integration of subsystems, which prevents communication between them and the possibility of a new emergence that leads to restructuring and the emergence of a more egalitarian system.

## References

[1] Sen, A. (1992). Sobre conceptos y medidas de pobreza. *Comercio exterior*, *42*(4), 310-322.

[2] Durán, J. G. R. (2021). Análisis complejo del fenómeno de la pobreza. *Revista CoPaLa. Construyendo Paz Latinoamericana*, *6*(13), 105-114.

[3] Maldonado, C. E. (2011). *Termodinámica y complejidad: Una introducción para las ciencias sociales y humanas*. Difundir Ltda.

[4] Bourdieu, P. (1997). La esencia del neoliberalismo. *Revista Colombiana de educación*, (35).

[5] Berry, B. J. (1964). Cities as systems within systems of cities. *Papers in regional science*, *13*(1), 147-163.

[6] Johnson, J. (2012). Cities: Systems of systems of systems. *Complexity theories of cities have come of age: An overview with implications to urban planning and design*, 153-172.

[7] Vaughan, L. (2007). The spatial syntax of urban segregation. *Progress in Planning*, *67*(3), 199-294.

[8] Ravallion, M. (2007). Urban poverty. *Finance and Development*, *44*(3), 15-17.